Politics of Sports in the Middle East

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.

The Center for International and Regional Studies

Established in 2005, the Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS) at Georgetown University in Qatar is a premier research institute devoted to the academic study of regional and international issues through dialogue and exchange of ideas, research and scholarship, and engagement with national and international scholars, opinion makers, practitioners, and activists. CIRS’s research is organized under three thematic clusters. In addition to a core focus on Regional Studies, the center also carries out projects under the vital and timely themes of ‘Environmental Studies’ and ‘Race and Society’. While the primary goal is to work closely with scholars to produce rigorous academic work on these topics, CIRS engages broadly with public audiences and seeks to disseminate knowledge to multiple local and international stakeholders and communities of interest.

We would like to gratefully acknowledge Suzi Mirgani’s editorial assistance in the production of this volume.
The Politics of Sports in the Middle East

Zahra Babar, Georgetown University-Qatar
Marc Lynch, The George Washington University

The 2022 World Cup held in Qatar became a focal point for a wide-ranging conversation about the relationship between sports and politics in the broader Middle East region. The tournament’s significance extended far beyond the spectacle of the game itself, sparking intense debates and emphasizing both the unity and fractures within the region, while also underscoring the complexities of the Middle East’s relationship with the broader world. Morocco’s epic run to the semi-final match galvanized a near-delirium of popular pan-Arab solidarities and an enthusiasm for Palestine which perhaps startled Arab leaders who were busy embracing the Abraham Accords process of normalization with Israel. These popular solidarities were visible not only across Doha’s stadiums and fan zones, but also crossed borders, as a surging pride for Arab football accomplishment appeared to, at least momentarily, transcend existing political, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural fissures—albeit at the cost, as Hisham Aidi reminds us, of erasing the many non-Arab strands of Moroccan identity along the way.

Hosting the tournament allowed Qatar to project its economic development, cultural richness, and modern infrastructure to the world. Through extensive media coverage the event offered Qatar, and the broader Middle East, an opportunity to challenge preconceived notions about the region. However, this World Cup, and the twelve years running up to it, drew more negative rather than positive publicity. Just days after the bid announcement, human rights campaigners used the global spotlight to draw intense attention to the costs of Qatar’s labor migration regime. The presence of international media and the influx of visitors for the tournament enabled activists to amplify their messages, raising awareness about the challenges faced by migrant workers involved in the construction of World Cup infrastructure. While the issue of migrant workers’ rights was the dominant area of interest, activists also used the occasion to speak about the unequal treatment and limited rights experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals within the country. Additionally, environmental and sustainability-focused organizations saw the 2022 World Cup as an opportunity to address concerns related to the ecological impact of such massive sporting events. Qatar’s hosting of the tournament raised questions about energy consumption, carbon emissions, and the sustainability of the infrastructure built specifically for the event.

In the heat of this World Cup moment, POMEPS partnered with Georgetown University-Qatar’s Center for International and Regional Studies—which has had a long-standing interest in studying sports and politics in the MENA region, and most recently completed a multiyear project on the World Cup—to bring together a group of scholars from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States to explore the deep interconnections between football and politics in the Middle East.

The topic of football and politics has been of increasing global interest across multiple academic disciplines in recent years. Scholars from various academic fields, including sociology, anthropology, political science, history, and cultural studies, have recognized that football serves as a unique platform for political expression, social mobilization, and the negotiation of national and cultural identities. For instance, the Egyptian football star Mo Salah has been the focus of several important academic studies. In 2022, CIRS published a collection of essays edited by Abdullah Al-Arian titled *Football in the Middle East*, which most directly inspired our efforts. In Al-Arian’s volume, scholars addressed a variety of important themes, including the historical roots of football and how it has been used as a political tool by autocrats, the influence of politics on the governance and regulation of the sport,
and the ways in which football has served both as a site for cooperation and contestation between states and their societies. Overall, this work demonstrates that across the region football has been a means of fostering national pride, promoting political ideologies, or even challenging oppressive regimes. Building on this, the current set of essays aims to further uncover the complex dynamics that shape the relationship between football and politics, and shed light on broader societal issues and power structures.

We invited scholars from a wide range of perspectives, making sure to include contributions focused not only on the Arab world but also on Iran and Turkey. Initially, we had hoped for a broad look at a wide range of sports, and to move the conversation beyond just football. There is so much more to say about sports, politics, and society in the Middle East: the responses to Tunisia’s ascendant female tennis star Ons Jabeur, as an example of the critical need to examine women and sports; Saudi Arabia’s investment in an alternative professional golf tour and eventual acquisition of the PGA Tour; Formula One and its ever-expanding presence and popularity in the Gulf; the emergence of the UAE’s central role in hosting major international cricket tournaments, which makes a lot of geographic and financial sense given the massive, local South Asian fan bases; the bids by Gulf states to host the Olympics and the various Asia Cups, Africa Cups, Gulf Cups, and other subregional and regional competitions. But ultimately, all of our authors opted to focus on football. We blame the World Cup.

A number of themes emerged from the workshop discussions and the resulting papers. First, there is a long history of the political implications of sports. Almost every essay in this collection traces the interaction between football clubs and high-profile national political issues over the course of nearly a century. Demerdash and Rabaia each show how Palestinians sought to use football to assert national identity both before and after the establishment of the state of Israel. This resonates with the nationalist struggles against colonial rule in countries such as Egypt, Algeria, and Morocco, where football clubs played vital roles in shaping and expressing aspirations for independence and self-determination. But as several of the essays suggest, this is not just about the past history of football but is very much tied to our current moment—football clubs continue to serve as sites of resistance, solidarity, and cultural expression. Football clubs are platforms for communities to unite and assert their national or regional identities in the face of repression, and they are also sustained spaces where political issues are discussed, debated, and confronted, serving to reflect the broader societal and political dynamics of their respective contexts.

Second, while acknowledging the continuities of sports’ histories and legacies in the Middle East, there is something qualitatively new about the investment by Gulf states—especially—in global sport. While Qatar’s hosting of the World Cup was a prominent regional milestone, it only scratched the surface of the broader and more aggressive state and private actor engagements with international sports. Abuamer and Nasser show how Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have competed to invest in football clubs not only locally but across Europe. There are intra-Gulf competitive dynamics at work, with several Gulf states engaging in open rivalry for regional dominance and influence via sports. Investing in global sport, particularly in football clubs, provides a platform for these states to assert their superiority and gain an edge over their neighbors. By acquiring or sponsoring successful teams (or, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the entire Professional Golf Association Tour), Gulf states can claim bragging rights and symbolic superiority, not just in sporting but also in geopolitical terms. It can also be quite lucrative. Whether these investments amount to “sportswashing” remains an intriguing and unresolved question. Clearly there are also economic and status motivations, in addition to the classic conception of investing in global cultural events to distract attention from human rights abuses. While the motivations behind Gulf states’ investment in global sport are multifaceted, it is crucial to acknowledge that they are not mutually exclusive, and intertwine in complex ways.

But more than just an extension of regional geopolitics and rivalries, investments in internationally recognized and branded sports teams offer unparalleled opportunities for gaining global exposure and influence, something quite critical for the smaller Gulf states. These investments
allow even the smallest states like Qatar to tap into a vast international fan base, leverage lucrative sponsorship deals with multinational corporations, and gain access to global media platforms. This expanded reach provides Gulf states with broader impact and heightened ability to shape narratives and perceptions on a global scale. Of course, there is also the negative blowback and heightened suspicion that these investments sometimes draw from audiences and stakeholders in Europe and elsewhere. Hostility to Saudi, Qatari or Emirati acquisition of local clubs may be muted when those teams succeed, but that can transform quickly into nativist or Islamophobic hostility should times turn tough.

Third, the essays in this collection show especially clearly how football represents a critical vector into local identity politics. Ryan shows how the rivalry between two local football clubs became a proxy for Jordanian-Palestinian conflict and veiled criticisms of the monarchy. Secen shows how Turkish politics get litigated in football stadiums, while Close traces the ill-fated venture of Egyptian Ultras into national politics, which culminated in a horrific massacre in a stadium in Port Said. Shahrokni examines the recurrent controversies over screening football matches in movie theaters to skirt the ban on women’s attendance in stadiums — and how those intersected with the recent wave of protests. Kashfi’s article highlights the tensions between the Azeri demands for ethnic recognition and the Persian-centric narrative of Iranian identity, and demonstrates how Azeri football challenges the state’s institutionalized policies of cultural homogenization. Taken together, these diverse studies demonstrate how sports can become a lens through which expressions of societal division, power struggle, and marginalizations are magnified. Football stadiums morph into arenas where political ideologies clash and cultural battles are fought, but also where social movements find a platform and gain momentum.

Fourth, different levels of performativity shine through in these essays. One level is global. Jones focuses on the online space, showing how football played out in the hotly contested social media sphere through the weaponization of bots, disinformation, and misleading narratives. The 2022 World Cup presented a global spectacle through which a wide range of competing movements, organizations, and individuals advanced their narratives through online activism. Social media platforms provided a space for discussion, organizing campaigns, raising awareness, challenging dominant narratives, and driving conversations around critical issues associated with the event. The Gulf investment in European and global football clubs described by Abuamer and Nassar similarly generated high levels of heated online political rhetoric, some authentic and some manipulated. The rapid rise of football as a cultural fixation has challenged some Islamist movements and governments to adapt to popular reality, as Tuastad observes.

Fifth, moving from the disembodied global level to the local, existing work has highlighted the importance of stadiums themselves as a site for the study of sports and politics, and has emphasized how these venues serve as both practical and symbolic spaces. Stadiums provide a platform for fostering national identity and unity, reinforcing national narratives, and creating a shared national experience. They can be used by political regimes to promote nationalist ideologies and strengthen political legitimacy, but they also offer a space for subversive counternarratives that challenge dominant ideologies and repressive structures. Several of the contributions highlight the distinctive experience of the stadium itself, where fans coming together to support their favorite teams chant slogans and express their solidarities in provocative ways, which might be impossible anywhere else in society. Such dynamics are explored in Jordan (Ryan), Iran (Kashfi, Shahrokni), Turkey (Secen), and Egypt (Close).

The essays in this collection offer a rich and varied window into these multidimensional politics, from the local to the global and from the historical to the contemporary. They offer a tantalizing glimpse into the possibilities for future research. With thanks for the tireless editorial assistance of Georgetown’s Suzi Mirgani, we are delighted to now present this terrific collection of essays on the politics of sports in the MENA region.

Zahra Babar and Marc Lynch, 21 June 2023
Endnotes

1 For example, see the special issue of Middle East Report, *The Politics and Passions of Football* (fall 2022), available at https://merip.org/magazine/304/ and the seven contributions to the roundtable “A post-colonial World Cup for the ages,” Abu Aardvark’s MENA Academy (December 14, 2022), available at https://abuaardvark.substack.com/p/a-postcolonial-world-cup-showdown


Uniter or Divider? Identity Politics and Football in Jordan

Curtis R. Ryan, Appalachian State University

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is host to one of the fiercest and most politicized sports rivalries in global football, the routine clashes between the (mainly Palestinian) al-Wehdat and (mainly East Bank Jordanian) al-Faisaly. These two teams have long dominated Jordan’s top football league, are intense rivals, and have had legendary battles both on and off the pitch, often featuring stadium chants by their respective fans that would cross regime red lines in any other setting. This essay examines not only the politics of the Wehdat-Faisaly rivalry, but also the role of football as both uniter and divider in Jordan’s identity debates and national politics. Football, I argue, has at times been emblematic of, and a contributor to, both unity and disunity in Jordanian public life.

Al-Faisaly v. al-Wehdat

In April 2022 something unusual happened in Jordanian football: al-Ramtha won Jordan’s Super Cup for the first time in 32 years. The surprise here was not just that al-Ramtha defeated Jordan’s most successful team, al-Faisaly, but also that this was one of the few championships in Jordan that was not won by either al-Faisaly or their arch-rival al-Wehdat. Between them, these two clubs had won a combined 31 Super Cup championships out of the previous 39. The two have tended to dominate Jordanian football, are fierce rivals, and have left a seemingly indelible imprint on Jordanian identity politics. As such, they are sometimes seen as a barometer of ethnic identity tensions within the Hashemite Kingdom.

The al-Faisaly football club was founded in 1932, even before Jordanian independence, and was named after the former Hashemite King of Syria and later Iraq. Known as the Blue Eagles, the club is the oldest and most successful in Jordanian history, claiming 35 titles in Jordan’s Premier League, 21 wins in Jordan’s annual FA Cup tournament, and 17 Super Cup championships (the Super Cup pits the winners of Jordan’s Premier League against the winners of its FA cup).

Al-Faisaly’s long-term rival, al-Wehdat, was founded in 1956 in the Palestinian refugee camp of the same name. Known as the Green Giant, Wehdat are fitted out in the Palestinian national colors, but known especially for their green jerseys, in contrast to the blue of Faisaly. Like their opponents, Wehdat have dominated Jordanian football, winning the Premier League 17 times, the FA Cup 11 times, and the Super Cup 14 times.

While both teams are known for their excellence on the field, and their many victories and championships, they are perhaps known even more for the zeal of their fans and for the strong ethnic identity politics underpinning their sports loyalties. The Wehdat fanbase is overwhelmingly made up of Palestinian Jordanians or West Bankers, while Faisaly’s fans are mainly East Bankers or tribal Transjordanians. Some in this community refer to themselves simply as “Jordanian Jordanians” or will say mi’a bil mi’a (one hundred percent) to indicate just how Jordanian they feel themselves to be. The most politicized of these see Faisaly and East Jordanian identity as almost inseparable, and hence see themselves as authentic Jordanians, in contrast to how they view the Palestinian support base for Wehdat—who are descendants of the many waves of Palestinian refugees into Jordan from 1948 onward, following the establishment of the State of Israel.

Some Faisaly fans view their Wehdat rivals, and Palestinian Jordanians in general, as temporary residents, refugees, disloyal outsiders, or simply foreigners. Some Wehdat fans, in contrast, are just as likely to stereotype their opponents—in this case as allegedly tribalistic and backward—and both fan bases often make negative references regarding their opponents that sometime touch on the Hashemite monarchy itself.
Meetings between the two teams amount to a national derby so intense that World Soccer dubbed it one of 50 greatest rivalries in football worldwide. In the sports sense, their clashes are akin to rivalries like Real Madrid versus Barcelona in Spain, or Arsenal versus Tottenham in the United Kingdom. But their political clashes have been more alarming, and have at times resulted in severe violence. Their fans can therefore perhaps be compared to the Ultras associated with Egyptian or Moroccan clubs, or the hooligans sometimes associated with English and Dutch club teams or national squads.

In 2010, for example, violence erupted at the Wehdat stadium following a victory over Faisaly. Fans of the latter were accused of hurling rocks at Wehdat fans, who rioted, but were confronted by rows of police blocking the exits. Two-hundred and fifty people were injured, filling up area hospitals, and adding yet another grim chapter to a longstanding rivalry.

**Performative Politics and an Instrumental Rivalry**

In addition to their mutual sports hostility, the fanbases of both clubs are also known for political chants and ethnic slurs against their opponents, and these sometimes expand to include scathing chants about the monarchy itself—a redline that is usually uncrossable, but which is sometimes tolerated only in this setting. In 2009, a Faisaly-Wehdat game was halted mid-play due to the specific political chants of the crowds. A U.S. diplomatic cable at the time noted that the match was cancelled after Faisaly fans began chanting “anti-Palestinian hooliganism and slogans denigrating the Palestinian origins of both the Queen and the Crown Prince.”

In these instances, zealous fans have bypassed the opposing team entirely, and instead focus on denigrating their fans—and what they perceive as a rival community in Jordan—and often cross redlines about Queen Rania or the heir to the throne, Prince Hussein. In 2017, apparently fed up with the rivalry and even more so with the derogatory chants about the monarchy, the Jordan Football Association went so far as to levy fines against both clubs and to declare that their games would be played without fans in the stadiums.

In his book on the politics of football in the Middle East, James Dorsey sees something instrumental in the Faisaly-Wehdat rivalry, and suggests that it may help the Jordanian state by perpetuating an East Bank-West Bank divide within the kingdom. There is something of a historical shadow hanging over Jordan in this regard, and that is the legacy of what is sometimes called Black September or the Jordanian civil war. Both terms are contested, as are the historical events themselves. But suffice it to say, at least, that Jordan’s political tensions boiled over in September 1970, featuring armed clashes between guerilla forces of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Jordanian armed forces. The violence ended the following summer, with royalist forces triumphing over the guerillas, ultimately expelling them to Lebanon, but at the cost of a high death toll and fighting that had at times included the shelling of camps and urban neighborhoods.

Even more than fifty years after the most significant internal conflict in Jordanian history, it remains difficult to talk about or research—and it is a very sensitive topic within Jordanian politics. The paradox is that Jordanian textbooks and education rarely address this key event, and yet some see the Jordanian state as having an interest in keeping this memory alive, vague though it is to most Jordanians, in part to maintain a social divide. Dag Tuastad, for example, has argued that “to avoid democratization, the memory of the civil war must be sustained.” He continues: “Jordan has had a history of ethnic-based football riots. These are reminders of the threats to stability, security and national unity. But as long as they are contained at the football stadiums, they serve the interests of political forces wanting to preserve power and political status quo.”

Wehdat also has a support base far beyond Jordan itself. Many Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, for example, support the club and see it as an exemplar of Palestinian identity. Indeed, despite the intensity of the Wehdat-Faisaly rivalry, many Faisaly fans (and certainly
most Jordanians in general) support Palestinian aims of an independent state, and hence both fan bases also have pro-Palestine chants (despite their insults to each other). In addition, most Palestinian Jordanians see themselves as Jordanians of Palestinian background, and hence as Jordanians—not as a distinct nationality.

It is also important to note that many Jordanians have no interest in football or in this particular football rivalry, or indeed in intra-ethnic identity divisions—whether real or imagined. In fact, many Jordanians see the recurring idea of a Palestinian–Jordanian divide as a manufactured mirage. Some see it a divisive strategy invoked and utilized to prevent reform or change. Many of Jordan’s protest movements in the era of the Arab Spring and after, for example, eschewed these artificial divisions and instead projected a more inclusive vision of Jordanian national identity.7

Jordanian artists in particular have (carefully) addressed this, challenging and even mocking the supposed identity rift. As James Dorsey has also noted, the popular Jordanian play “Neither East nor West,” for example, found the humor and artificiality in this divide by focusing on a newlywed couple, an East Jordanian husband and Palestinian Jordanian wife—inter-marriage is a common and relatable topic in the country. The humor dwells on their divided sports loyalties—Faisaly and Wedhat, of course—with differences over blue or green football clothing and gear, different colored keffiyas, and even differences over the ethnic identities of key foods. The play includes, for example, a humorous disagreement over what is the national dish—mansaf (sometimes seen as a tribal and East Jordanian classic) or mulūkhīya (sometimes seen as Palestinian).8 As Dag Tuastad has noted, these traditional dishes even became part of stadium chants, including as blatantly as “we are mansaf, you are mulūkhīya,” among others.9

Hisham Bustani, one of Jordan’s most famous and award-winning writers, generated considerable controversy and no shortage of state consternation with what is now considered one of his great and classic short stories: “Faisaly and Wehdat.” The story examines the tragedy and utter pointlessness of the zeal and mutual hostility of two fans—the “green man” and the “blue man”—who, following their own violent and deadly clash, are ultimately indistinguishable from one another.10 The story also underscores the toxic masculinity as well as the artificial identity politics that underpins this rivalry—a rivalry that is clearly about more than just sports.

When I interviewed Hisham Bustani for Middle East Report, we discussed this very story, and how it almost led to a book ban by the Jordanian state. He noted: “This story was the result of a bewilderment I had and still have about how a relatively new set of fabricated identities are taken for granted at face value among many sectors of society, despite all the contrary historical, societal, economic and even political facts that are still evident and alive today. These identities are the direct product of colonialist division of the region following World War I, which were then adopted and fiercely promoted by corrupt, subordinate regimes as part of their legitimizing propaganda and pseudo-historical narratives.”11 In his essay, “A Bouquet of Subversive Ideas, Dedicated to Censorship,” Bustani notes that “the story brings up the explosive subject of the sociopolitical and identitarian crisis linked to origins—origins east or west of the Jordan River, i.e., Jordanian or Palestinian. […] The two names mentioned in the title refer to the two main local football teams in which all this divisiveness becomes concentrated.”12

**An-Nashama, an-Nashmiyyat, and Za’atari**

And yet, for all this intensity of ethnic division, there are moments when football in Jordan is not about divisiveness at all, but rather about unity. Those moments do not happen when Faisaly and Wehdat play, but they do happen when the national teams take the field to represent Jordan—all of Jordan—and not just West Bank or East Bank Jordanian identity. Faisaly–Wehdat matches are indeed politically polarizing for some Jordanians but, for many more, the country comes back together in its collective love for both the men’s and women’s national
teams—the Nashama and the Nashmiyyat. The men's national team, perhaps ironically, often relies heavily on players from the kingdom's two historically dominant clubs: Faisaly and Wehdat.

Both the Nashama and Nashmiyyat also represent a true cross-section of Jordanian society. Their players include both West and East Bank communities in their makeup as well as both Muslims and Christians, Arabs and Circassians, and players from every region and community in the country. In the last ten years or so, both teams have been experiencing something of a resurgence. In June 2013, for example, the women's national team—the Nashmiyyat—played so well that they qualified for the Asia Football Cup for the first time.

The Jordanian men's national team also had a banner year in 2013, looking to secure a spot in the World Cup for the first time. The Nashama had to beat Oman in order to stay in contention for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. The game was tight and hard fought, and had captured the attention of much of Jordanian society, with the Nashama eventually pulling away with a 1–0 win. As the stadium crowd in Amman exploded in joy, the television audience was treated to a nearly-hysterical announcer declaring that the Nashama had brought life back to the Dead Sea.

The team then had one last hurdle: a final game to determine which of two teams would advance to the World Cup—Jordan or Uruguay. Sadly for the Nashama, and for their many Jordanian fans, they came up one game short, with Uruguay advancing to the World Cup in Brazil. But the journey that year of both the Nashama and Nashmiyyat had captivated the attention of much of the nation, providing unifying national moments separate from in-country club rivalries, ethnic identity rifts, or struggles over Jordan's politics and policies. As I wrote at the time, “in June—despite difficult economic conditions, intense debates over reform and the danger of spillover from the Syrian war—the Nashama and Nashmiyyat, regardless of background, were the unquestioned favorite sons and daughters of all Jordanians.”

Yet, in the years that followed, Jordan's economy has continued to struggle, and the country has certainly been deeply affected by the disaster of the Syrian civil war. In the post-Arab Spring era, in fact, Jordan's economy, society, and politics have been challenged by the addition of yet another community: 1.3 million Syrian refugees. While Syrian refugees are not part of the Jordanian teams, football has nonetheless played a key role, even in the refugee camps and in nearby—and often poor—Jordanian host communities, especially those in the north near the Syrian border.

As the refugee crisis unfolded, the Asia Football Development Program (AFDP) was led by Prince Ali Ibn Hussein, who was also Vice President of FIFA and head of the Jordan Football Association—and it was the AFDP that focused on bringing football to Syrian refugees. “Food, water, and housing are all priorities,” noted the prince in a discussion we had in 2014, “but kids also have to have something to do. And sport can build a community spirit.” Football in particular has been the main activity for children in the camps, in nearby towns, and in Jordan's urban centers, often with the active support of the AFDP in terms of clinics, training, free football balls, and so on. “Football is not an elitist sport, it’s a game for everyone,” said Prince Ali, “And it can help promote the health and well-being of girls and boys.”

The football programs are important because they are as grassroots as efforts can get, including on the gravel football pitches of Za'atari, where there is no grass at all. Such programs may be especially important because they are among the few good things in an otherwise dire set of circumstances. Amid Jordan's already tense identity politics, Jordanian society and the Jordanian state are not inclined to extend citizenship to Syrians, even more than a decade after the Syrian refugee crisis began. Football cannot solve that, but it is the bare minimum supplier of temporary happiness to many children in the kingdom, Syrians and Jordanians alike.
Conclusion

Football seems to be connected to many of Jordan's key challenges. At times, it underscores the kingdom's deepest ethnic fissures and may even be used by some to widen the gaps in Jordanian society. Jordanian football—and not just its most intense rivalry—can be both emblematic of, and also a contributor to, Jordan's identity divisions. But at other times it is the great unifier, bringing Jordanians of all classes, religions, and ethnic backgrounds together, at least temporarily. Football has even been a key positive force in otherwise dark circumstances—from Syrian refugee camps to Jordan's many poor villages and urban neighborhoods. Football both reflects and adds to Jordan's most intense moments of unity and disunity, and it can provide at least one window to understanding the sometimes complex national identity politics of the Hashemite Kingdom.

Endnotes

3 Montague, "Football's Greatest Rivalries."
7 For a more thorough discussion of this complex topic, see Curtis R. Ryan, Jordan and the Arab Uprisings: Regime Survival and Politics Beyond the State (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 90–113.
8 Dorsey, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, 46.
The “Bot-iful” Game:
Football, Social Media Manipulation, and Transnational Gulf Politics

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On November 18, 2022, the eve of the Qatar FIFA World Cup, an unusual story began to appear in papers across the globe. Media outlets reported that Qatar’s national football team had bribed Ecuador to lose their opening game 2–1. Despite the absence of any proof, barring a single tweet from a Gulf-based influencer named Amjad Taha, mainstream and highly subscribed news outlets across South America and Europe, including La Patilla (Venezuela), De Telegraaf (Netherlands), Fox Sports Mexico, and El Comercio (Ecuador), reported the story as if it could be true. The story went viral in multiple languages, including Italian, Greek, Spanish, Dutch, and English. Given the extant allegations of corruption that had marred Qatar’s bid, perhaps editors thought that the news was plausible. But it is striking that most journalists did not seem to corroborate the story, nor to discover what many observers of Gulf politics already knew: Taha was a routine source of disinformation in the Gulf.¹

Taha’s evidence-free claims nonetheless gained some credibility through the thousands of retweets and his blue verification checkmark, which signalled, according to Twitter’s pre-Musk verification method, that he was a real person (which he is) as well as someone “notable” (which is debatable). Taha heads up the London Research Centre, which does not exist.² What is important in this context is that many of the retweets that signaled his supposed credibility were augmented by bots—fake accounts designed to automatically retweet content.³ The fact that this global news story emanated from a single tweet by a disinfluencer (an influencer who routinely spreads disinformation) highlights the power of social media in shaping discursive narratives in general, and around high-profile global events such as the World Cup in particular.

The nexus of Gulf politics and football has become a discursive battleground with global reach, where attempts at soft power and nation branding are vulnerable to small ripples in the information ecosystem. Taha’s tweet was a powerful reminder that Gulf states are among the world’s most influential manipulators of social media for disinformation and propaganda. The mediatization of the Gulf’s growing role in global football has been influenced by regional conflicts, rivalries, and competing visions for the politics of the broader Middle East—battles often waged through social media.

Information Warfare and the Weaponization of Social Media in the Middle East

The 2022 Qatar World Cup, the first ever held in an Arab country, occurred in an “extremely online” era, a post-truth era, and one of the most densely, digitally penetrated information ecosystems in the world. “Extremely online” here is simply the term used to describe the fact that so much content is consumed and disseminated online, particularly for Gulf states that have some of the highest take-ups of digital technology on the planet. The average global user spends seven hours per day on the internet. In the UAE, for example, it is over eight hours. Since 2013, global social media usage time has almost doubled.⁴ People in the Middle East and North Africa spend the second largest amount of time on social media, falling closely behind South and Central America.⁵ What happens online matters. Journalists face particular challenges in this extremely online environment, and the rise of digital media and “extremely online” culture has contributed to the emergence of a post-truth era in which public opinion is less influenced by objective facts and more by emotion and confirmation bias. New social media platforms have posed a challenge to existing gatekeepers of knowledge, such as large media corporations, and have facilitated the spread of conspiracy theories, hate speech, uninformed analysis, mis/disinformation, and propaganda.
This environment is shaped not just by general loss of truth, but the active weaponization of social media by states and other actors that have turned to social media to spread divisive propaganda designed to sow division and discord among their perceived enemies. Russia’s Internet Research Agency (IRA), an outfit based in St. Petersburg with close connections to the Wagner Group, is perhaps the most notorious example. In 2016, it set up social media accounts to try and influence the US election. While real people with pseudonyms (trolls) were used to operate these accounts, they were also assisted by a network of automated “bot” accounts. Trolls and bots have become a part of the post-truth lexicon, symbolizing the ease with which anonymous actors with unclear intentions can insert themselves in an attempt to manipulate public opinion.

While the trolls and bots of Russia’s IRA have become one of the most widely publicized digital disinformation case studies, they are certainly not the only ones engaging in such cyber warfare. Indeed, digital influence operations—attempts to gain the upper hand in the communicative landscape (the so-called “grey zone”)—are becoming part of most states’ hybrid warfare capabilities. The Middle East, and particularly the Gulf states, are no exception. In fact, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) can be considered digital superpowers—states that use digital technology at a massive scale to try and project influence domestically, regionally, and internationally.

As an example, archives released by Twitter of suspended accounts linked to state-backed influence operations show that Saudi Arabia and the UAE are the second largest manipulators of Twitter behind China. From launching online smear campaigns against dissidents and giving critics draconian prison sentences, to drowning out criticism with automated accounts spreading pro-government propaganda, digital technology has been co-opted by authoritarian states and networks of malign actors.

The Road to the World Cup was Paved by the Gulf Crisis

Online discursive battles flourish during times of conflict and crisis as adversaries attempt to win the narrative war. At least some part of the online discourse around Qatar 2022 has been shaped by regional conflict and competition, potentially undermining Qatari attempts to use its historic hosting of football’s premiere global event as a soft power tool. For soft power to be effective it needs a supportive environment. Indeed, while hosting mega sporting events or purchasing football clubs can be positive in terms of a nation-branding opportunity, and even sportswashing, political rivals can use such opportunities to harm their adversaries.

The 2017 Gulf crisis, which saw Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt sever relations with Qatar due to allegations that the country supported terrorism (especially through Al Jazeera), created an extremely hostile information environment leading up to the World Cup. As has been highlighted by Majd Abuamer and Yara Nassar in this volume, the crisis drew global attention to the region and the Gulf’s growing role in football politics in Europe. The initiation of the blockade was itself a novel event in the history of social media weaponization. It was a conflict launched alongside a huge information operation involving thousands of fake accounts, which amplified the blockading countries’ demands and attempted to sow social conflict in Qatar. Social media, more than television, radio, or newspapers, became the platform to launch information warfare to ensure maximum reach across multiple demographics.

The narrative wars that emerged as a result of the Gulf crisis highlight the role of the (dis)information supply chains and the “deception order,” defined as an assemblage of actors, including states, individuals, PR companies, and social media firms, that allow or create an environment to facilitate the transmission of misinformation. In many cases, “this group benefits from the commodification of deception and disinformation...it is an industry that exists to create a pseudo-reality, one in which a reality preferred by those with money and power is made.” Such misinformation is not always about falsehoods, but rather selection and prominence.

While the Gulf states had their own reasons for weaponizing social media against one another, the hostile
environment became a business opportunity for British and American PR firms and strategic communication organizations. London in particular has acquired a reputation as the “reputation laundering capital of the world.” Here, those with money can buy media influence, either favorable coverage or coverage that damn their rivals. This ease is partly due to the lack of regulations like the Foreign Agents Registration Act, which offers some degree of transparency and accountability for entities engaging in lobbying on behalf of foreign clients. British firms were actively involved in smearing Qatar as a terrorist-supporting state in 2017. Project Associates, a British company contracted by the UAE Supreme Media Council, worked with SCL Social Limited (the parent company of Cambridge Analytica) to create and promote media content on social media that portrayed Qatar in a negative light. Documents submitted by SCL Social Limited/Project Associates under requirements of the US Foreign Agents Registration Act include screenshots of the content promoted by the companies. One included a video posted by an account listed under Saudi American Public Affairs Committee—a firm also engaged in campaigns designed to frame Qatar negatively—which accused Qatar of using North Korean forced labor to build its stadiums, and was based primarily on a Guardian newspaper article from 2014. The contract, which was worth more than $300,000, also involved making anti-Qatar news more prominent in English-language news outlets like the Independent and New Europe. Among the screenshots in the United States Department of Justice filings were also posts from a Twitter and Facebook account set up specifically for the campaign called “Boycott Qatar.”

In October 2017, a BBC report on the 2022 World Cup cited material by a company called Cornerstone Global, a little-known London-based consultancy, casting doubt on Qatar’s ability to host the tournament. In February 2019, The New York Times reported that Cornerstone Global, had pitched a plan to link Qatar to the Muslim Brotherhood, which some regimes consider a terrorist organization, in part by placing articles in British media. Similarly, Sir Lynton Crosby, the election strategist who has helped right-wing parties get elected in the UK and Australia, pitched a 5.5 million GBP campaign to have the Qatar World Cup canceled. The Guardian newspaper saw a pitch from CTF Partners titled “Project Ball” that detailed how the firm would, primarily through hostile media and social media coverage, put pressure on FIFA to cancel the World Cup and award it to another country. Thus, social media and traditional media have a reciprocal quality. While social media often serves to amplify stories from the traditional media, traditional media is increasingly reporting stories that originate in or are about social media. This convergence has an amplification effect that can create a “firehouse” of information. CTF Partners detailed how it would spread negative stories about Qatar in the mainstream media, lobby friendly politicians, journalists, and academics, and run ostensibly grassroots campaigns on social media. By linking the first World Cup in a Muslim-majority country to terrorism, the companies would be playing on extant media biases in the British media, where Islam and Muslims are predominantly framed negatively. It was reportedly also pitched to Khalid Al Hail, the self-styled head of the Qatari opposition, who had hosted a conference in London as part of a reportedly “multi-million-pound marketing campaign” to have Qatar stripped of the World Cup. It is not clear if the CTF proposal was ever activated.

With elements from the deception order trying to secure contracts for negative campaigns related to the Qatar World Cup, it was no surprise that the digital space was flooded with adversarial content. Social media campaigns targeting Qatar and the tournament became especially common. In July 2019, for example, the Arabic hashtag “Qatari pitches kill workers” began trending. Of at least 629 of the unique accounts tweeting the hashtag, around 427 (68%) were bots, and subsequently suspended by Twitter. Again, the campaign reflected attempts to tap into very real and emotive issues around the World Cup, including labor rights. However, the presence of fake accounts promoting the message suggested an attempt to manipulate the conversation. The issue of labor rights, itself an extant and serious human rights concern throughout the Gulf, also became the subject of misinformation. The most widely shared tweet from a British newspaper suggested that 6,500
workers had died in connection to the World Cup; it was quickly debunked, but not before it had established itself as fact in popular discourse.\textsuperscript{24}

Given the comparative size of the blockading countries, and their role as the belligerents, it is perhaps not surprising that their known digital information warfare strategies were more evident than Qatar’s. However, campaigns aligned with Qatar were also evident. In 2018, it was revealed that Qatar had run a “black ops” campaign through a New York-based PR company to undermine rival bids for the World Cup.\textsuperscript{25} In March 2020, New York-based social media analysis firm Graphika published a report titled “Operation Red Card” that detailed how an Indian PR firm called aRep conducted an influence operation targeting the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Western Europe, and the professional football world with “Anti-Saudi, Anti-UAE and Pro-Qatar” content.\textsuperscript{26} The network, which operated mostly on Facebook and was classified as “relatively” tiny in the Graphika study, was shut down on February 29, 2020. It consisted of approximately 122 “assets” and, like several takedowns related to Israel, Egypt, and the UAE, was managed by a commercial marketing firm. The primary tactic of Operation Red Card was the employment of phoney accounts to manage groups and pages to direct users to “off-platform” websites masquerading as news providers. Politically, the campaign “reflected international concerns over issues such as the Gulf states’ military campaign in Yemen and the accompanying humanitarian crisis, the murder of Saudi opposition journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and Saudi Arabia’s record on women’s rights.”\textsuperscript{27} In addition, Operation Red Card network criticized the UAE’s ownership of Manchester City.\textsuperscript{28} Qatar also increased the amount of money put into lobbying in Washington as a result of the Gulf crisis, tripling its expenditure on new lobbying contracts as compared to the year before the blockade.\textsuperscript{29}

The Post-Truth and Gulf Crisis Nexus

Attempts to influence European audiences on the topics of football, human rights, and Gulf politics became particularly noticeable leading up to Qatar 2022. But these efforts are also the result of Gulf countries’ increasing investment in European and global sports more broadly. The ownership of European football clubs has become a useful reputational platform, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar are attempting to increase soft power via influence in global sports governance. In 2008, Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the UAE bought the British club Manchester City.\textsuperscript{30} Qatar Sports Investments (QSI), a company owned by the Qatari government, acquired a 70 percent stake in the French club Paris Saint-Germain in 2011. A Saudi-led consortium, that included the country’s Public Investment Fund (PIF), eventually completed its purchase of Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC) in October 2021.\textsuperscript{31}

Such takeovers are not exceptional to the Gulf, but rather a phenomenon of wealth. Rich oligarchs and corporate magnates from all over the world have acquired football teams, such as the American Glazer family, which owns 90 percent of Manchester United, and Roman Abramovich, who owned Chelsea Football Club until recently.\textsuperscript{32} For regimes attempting to engage in nation branding, there may be reputational benefits. However, these purchases have inevitably brought European and Gulf politics closer to one another. As Gulf states vie for regional supremacy and influence, an outcome of this has been the phenomenon of a battle of narratives that has played out in European legacy media and social media. For Saudi Arabia, the PIF’s bid for NUFC was examined more closely because it came after MBS’s high-profile violations of human rights, including the murder of writer Jamal Khashoggi, the war in Yemen, and the jailing of many Saudi women’s rights activists. This scrutiny was accompanied by a social media campaign to try and defend Saudi’s human rights record. In the social media space, legions of questionable accounts attempted to deflect concerns about Saudi Arabia’s human rights record by arguing that the English Premier League’s delay in approving the sale of NUFC was a Qatari ploy. This attempt to influence grassroots NUFC supporters sought to both demote criticism of Saudi Arabia, but also frame the takeover problems as a product of a regional spat in the Gulf as opposed to a more structural issue with governance and human rights in Saudi Arabia.
In the spring of 2020, several NUFC supporters with Saudi-related emojis in their profiles took to Twitter to praise MBS and Saudi Arabia, including one man who donned a Newcastle jersey and ghutra (a traditional headscarf worn by many Gulf men). Among these fans were Emily Sarnes and Georgia Abrewis, who tweeted their approval of the proposed takeover of Newcastle by a Saudi-led consortium, including Saudi’s Public Investment Fund. Emily’s photo was a group photograph of a women’s football squad, all wearing Newcastle jerseys, while Georgia’s was a selfie in her black-and-white striped “magpie” jersey. Bizarrely, both accounts also tweeted a photo of Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Qatar’s emir, taking a topless selfie. Both Abrewis and Sarnes had used the identical caption: “so ugly.” The photo, not widely known except by those familiar with Gulf politics, is of unclear origin, although Tamim’s phone was targeted in a UAE-led hack in 2017. The episode was bizarre. Why would two women from the northeast of England be tweeting fairly obscure pictures of the Qatari emir in relation to a Saudi-led takeover of a English Premier League football club?

Not long after these posts, Abrewis, whose Twitter username was “NewcastleMBS,” abruptly changed her profile picture to the NUFC emblem and began tweeting only in Arabic. The “so ugly” message and Tamim’s photograph were removed from the accounts, along with all previous tweets. It appeared as if the accounts were stolen and used for the campaign as sock puppets—accounts falsely purporting to be their real user, hijacked to manipulate or deceive audiences. Emily Sarnes, whose Twitter handle was MBSLoved, was quickly suspended by Twitter. Even so, suspicious pro-MBS and pro-NUFC takeover accounts started showing up on Twitter. One account, with the Twitter handle @NUFC_SA, claimed to be a consortium of people who supported the PIF takeover. When I looked into the account’s history, I found that it used to belong to a pharmacy in Saudi Arabia, but that someone had taken it over to spread propaganda. The digital space became a jarring juncture of legitimate NUFC fans and shady accounts doing PR on behalf of the purchase. Within the digital public sphere, it became increasingly difficult to determine what and, indeed, who was real.

Pitched media battles also came to a head when Saudi Arabia was discovered by the World Trade Organization (WTO) to have facilitated beoutQ, a statewide television piracy operation of beIN Sports, a Qatari sports broadcaster that holds the rights to broadcast English Premier League games in the MENA region. After severing relations with Qatar in 2017, Saudi Arabia banned beIN Sports, based on the accusation that the channel supported “terrorism.” The WTO had ruled that beoutQ was a “commercial-scale” operation managed by individuals or entities under the jurisdiction of Saudi Arabia. It also found that the Saudi government did nothing to stop the piracy and even promoted public screenings of beoutQ. Indeed, the report detailed how high-profile figures, such as Saud al-Qahtani, a royal court adviser known for overseeing Saudi offensive information operations, actively promoted beoutQ on his Twitter account.

The Battle of Narratives

A striking aspect of the attempts to influence the world of European and global sports politics has been the emergence of a corollary industry of narrative manipulation. These narratives, fostered directly by the state, by companies working for state entities or by Gulf-owned media firms, attempted to influence and elicit sympathy from foreign audiences. Except for SCL Social and its links to the UAE Supreme Media Council, and as is common with cyber operations and social media manipulation, it is hard to attribute any of these activities to particular individuals or organizations. Nonetheless, the campaigns show attempts to manipulate global audiences with narratives that reflect the domestic or foreign policy objectives of different parties, including corporations and states. Several scholars in this volume (e.g. Curtis Ryan and Sefa Secen) have drawn attention to the polarizing potential of football, especially at a domestic and national identity-based level. However, exploiting the allegiance of football fans globally to grind regional political axes is an interesting and novel dynamic regarding transnational Gulf football politics.

The rise of digital technology and social media, along with an “extremely online” culture, has highlighted...
the problem of transnational illiberal practices. Digital technology is abused for purposes of propaganda, disinformation, deception, and surveillance to buttress the power of authoritarian states. Football, with its emotive fanbase, global popularity, and capital-heavy investment opportunities, is also a key sphere for competing narratives around which reputations and visions of Gulf regimes are constructed in the international arena. These discursive battlefields, and the global nature of social media, reflect a new and vulnerable front in the information ecosystem—one where realities are being shaped in favor of powerful and/or wealthy, but often secretive and undemocratic forces. Changes in news values—where journalists are encouraged to find “shareable” content, defined broadly as content that either makes you angry or laugh—are also catalysing the virality of disinformation designed to be sensationalist and “shareable.” The global focus on the region due to the World Cup, like the ongoing battles over Gulf ownership of European clubs, was an opportunity for global audiences to be exposed to Gulf-based disinformation.

Endnotes

1 Amjad Taha (@amjadt25), “Exclusive: Qatar bribed eight Ecuadorian players $7.4 million to lose the opener (1-0 2nd half). Five Qatari and #Ecuador insiders confirmed this. We hope it’s false. We hope sharing this will affect the outcome. The world should oppose FIFA corruption.,” Twitter, November 17, 2022, https://web.archive.org/web/20221118010404/https://twitter.com/amjadt25/status/1593271354803032064.

2 Marc Owen Jones, Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Deception, Disinformation and Social Media (London: Hurst, 2022).


4 Marc Owen Jones (@marcowenjones), “Update on #Qatar2022 disinformation. Yesterday, @amjadt25, a well-known disinfluencer (spreader of disinformation) tweeted that Qatar bribed #Ecuador $7.4 million dollars to lose 1-0 in their opening game. There is no reason to believe this is true. But the tweet went viral,” Twitter, November 18, 2022, https://twitter.com/marcowenjones/status/1593515158852321280.


9 Marc Owen Jones, Digital Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Deception, Disinformation and Social Media (London: Hurst, 2022).


12 Jones, Digital Authoritarianism, 47.


17 Montague and Panja, “Ahead of Qatar World Cup”


20 Waterson, “Revealed.”


27 Nimmo et al., “Operation Red Card.”

28 Nimmo et al., “Operation Red Card.”


33 “Magpie” is the nickname given to NUFC fans.


37 World Trade Organization, “Saudi Arabia.”

38 World Trade Organization, “Saudi Arabia.”
On January 5, 2018, during a football match in Tabriz, East Azerbaijan, the Azeri football team Tractor SC was leading against their long-time rival from the capital city. The crowd at the stadium began chanting “Arabian Gulf,” aligning themselves with Iran’s neighboring Arab states in a longstanding dispute over the name of the gulf that borders the countries. The audience cheered in Azeri, shouting “urmu xazar bizimdi, xelij Arab lerindi,” which can be translated to “Lake Urmia and the Caspian Sea belong to us [Azeris], as the Gulf belongs to Arabs.” Such use of alternatives to Persian Gulf would not only be condemned by Iranians, as an active contribution to the abandonment of a historical name, but would also be seen as a blatant assault on Persian heritage and Iranian identity. The recent resurgence of ethnolinguistic sentiments, expressed by discontented individuals of ethnic minorities in Iranian stadiums, reflects a deep and lasting sense of dissatisfaction with how Iranian identity is articulated, in contrast to the dominant nationalistic narrative. Football stadiums represent a key venue in which ethnic minorities express these challenges.

Over the past decade, non-Persian-speaking minorities in Iran have voiced their demands for equal political rights and cultural recognition, challenging the dominant nationalist discourse of identity and its exclusive definition of “Iranianess.” Ethnic groups in the provinces of Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Baluchistan openly question the disregard of the country’s ethnic and linguistic diversity, and advocate for recognition of their language and ethnic heritage. As the minority issue resurfaced in public debates, the study of ethnicity, which had long been neglected in Iranian Studies, also gained scholarly attention, leading to an extensive literature on ethnicity and the politics of identity in Iran. Scholars focused on the construction of the Persian-centric narrative of identity, the historical development of the Iranian nation’s imagination, and the significant role played by nationalist-minded intellectuals, scholars, and statesmen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In particular, they problematized the disproportionate emphasis on the Persian language and heritage in the nationalist reading of Iranian history and society, and the Persian-centric definitions of Iranianness. Indeed, some scholars have further criticized the Persian-speaking majority’s political, socioeconomic, and cultural hegemony, seeing it as an example of chauvinism and inherent racism in Iranian society.

Different forms and expressions of ethnolinguistic sentiments nonetheless remain unexplored, with their counternarratives of identity incorporating themes, rhetoric, and symbolism employed to forge an alternative ethnic form of belonging. This study examines the use of sport as a distinctive means of and arena for expressing repressed ethnic feelings. It focuses specifically on Tractor SC, a football club founded in Tabriz and supported by Azeri ethnic minorities, as a key focal point in the construction, consolidation, and expression of Azeri identity in Iran. It aims to shed light on how a seemingly “neutral” avenue like football develops political and cultural dimensions in a politically closed environment. Tractor SC offers a unique arena for representing the idea of ethnic or even national distinctiveness for Azeris and serves as an effective vehicle for a form of cultural resistance to celebrate an alternative identity, different from and opposed to the Persian-centric narrative of Iranianness. This study explores how slogans, songs, and banners are used to sustain a distinct sense of identity for many Tractor fans, for whom the club is their most significant single ethnocultural focus.

The Intertwined Relationship between Nationalism and Sport

The link between nationalism and sport is a close one in the modern world, as both are highly emotional phenomena that often evoke intense devotion and even
violence. Sport has been used in various ways to further national causes, as evidenced by the concept of national sport and the popularity of international competitions. Football, in particular, as the world's most popular sport, has become a central medium for the overt display and reinforcement of national sentiments. This is achieved through collective practices such as waving flags, singing national anthems, and wearing team jerseys, which generate a sense of emotional belonging and solidarity among members of the nation. At the same time, this also creates a sense of difference and sometimes even hostility towards those who do not support the team. Memories of victories and defeats, as well as sporting achievements, become part of the national memory and evoke feelings of pride and attachment to the nation, providing shared points of reference for its residents to recognise themselves through time.

The rise of right-wing populist politicians in recent years has given new momentum to the relationship between sports and nationalism. Sport is once again being utilized to foster a sense of national unity and international prestige, particularly by nationalist politicians who are fearful of the impact of global culture. Success in international competitions, where a team embodies a nation and competes against other nations, is used to fuel nationalist sentiment and strengthen a sense of affiliation and loyalty. An example of this can be seen in Turkey, where Recep Tayyip Erdoğan uses the passion and success of a football club to deflect potential protest against his authoritarian regime.

However, despite being a symbol of national unity, football can also reflect resentment towards it. In the absence of democratic institutions, football can serve as a channel for deeper social and political discontent regarding the state of national identity, particularly as an outlet for minority resentment towards imposed cultural and/or linguistic dominance. Football gatherings, often with large crowds, have become sites of contestation, identity claims, and nationalist performance, where minorities can wave their flags, sing their songs, and speak in their scorned mother tongues. Football stadiums provide a relatively safe environment for expressing otherwise repressed views and discontent. Some ethnic minorities are denied representation in national sports, and thus they express their passion and support for a sports club of their region. Examples of this include Belfast Celtic and Glasgow Celtics, both representing Irish identity, or Athletic Bilbao, associated with Basque identity. However, the most well-known example is FC Barcelona, which has become more than a club in twentieth-century Spain, as evidenced by their motto “mes que un club,” meaning “more than a club.” The team acts as a symbolic representation of Catalan identity and a focal point for resistance against a repressive government where followers can exhibit and promote their repressed identity. Many have followed the club more out of pride than any interest in football, as doing so allows them to express their forbidden feelings at Camp Nou, the team's stadium, by openly shouting and speaking in Catalan.

**Tractor SC and Ethnic Identifications**

In recent years, Iranian Azeris have become increasingly vocal in their demands to safeguard their ethnic identity, culture, and language. These ethnic sentiments and demands take different forms and varied expressions. In addition to numerous regional protests, grassroots activities, and literary revival movements, Azeri groups have vigorously employed football gatherings as a vehicle for ethnic expression. Slogans, songs, and banners, which are the most commonly used linguistic and symbolic representations in Sahand Stadium, primarily reflect four major categories: firstly, the celebration of the Azeri language and demands for education in the mother tongue; secondly, the remembrance and glorification of Azeri ancestry, mythology, and the memories of deceased Azeri heroes; thirdly, the collective connections to the ancestral land and its iconic geographical landscapes; and lastly, the Pan-Azeri and Pan-Turkic sentiments that call for a cultural, or even political, union among all Turkic-origin peoples that often take a chauvinistic or even racist tone. All of these resources are subjective and symbolic tools that are available to represent an alternative to the dominant nationalistic narrative of Iranian identity.
The recognition of their unique ethnolinguistic identity is highly valued among Azeris, with many openly advocating for the use of the Azari language in Iran and the right to receive education in their mother tongue at all levels. Tractor fans, especially Tifusis, the most cohesive and organized group of Tractor fans, with a unique style of cheering for the club, have used Sahand Stadium as a platform to express such demands, with slogans, songs, and banners focused on advocating for the recognition of Azerbaijan's language, literature, and culture. Slogans such as “Everyone should have a school in their own language” and “School [education] should be in Azeri” are frequently heard in Sahand Stadium. A noteworthy example of this demand in action is during Tractor games when all Tifusi fans unite to chant a slogan in the fifteenth minute. This coordinated protest aims to draw attention to Article Fifteen of the Islamic Republic Constitution, which concerns the right to education in the mother tongue. The article designates Persian as the official language and script of Iran and the common language of its citizens, while also allowing for the use of regional and tribal languages in the media and for teaching literature in schools. The demands of the Azeri activists and Tractor fans go further and essentially question the underlying well-accepted assumption that Iranian identity finds its expression only through the Persian language. This assumption leads to the labelling of the minority’s demands, languages, and dialects as threats to the national culture that need to be reformed or eliminated. The demands practically challenge the denial of linguistic diversity in Iran, the fixation on the Persian language, and the discrediting and devaluing of other languages spoken in Iran as century-long institutionalized policies of cultural homogenization in the country.

Tractor fans use their songs and slogans to refer to ethnic heroes and legends, which revive ethnic sentiments and promote an alternative ethnic narrative of the past. Among these heroes, the ninth-century figure Babak Khorramdin holds great symbolic significance and his name is often chanted by the fans in Sahand Stadium. Babak led a fierce local resistance movement against Arab Caliphs, becoming a symbol of ethnic resistance and defiance in Azerbaijan. His story represents a tale of heroism and a political narrative that can inspire contemporary ethnic discontents. It offers a historically failed yet politically liberating resistance, aimed at delegitimizing the status quo. The legend of Babak reflects the true Azeri spirit, inspiring feelings of pride and dignity that Azeris can relate to and identify with, as it portrays acts of sacrifice of the glorious dead that inspire the living. An explicitly ethnopolitical symbol frequently used by Tifusi fans is the grey wolf. They raise their right arms in the air, forming a wolf shape with their hands, while shouting, “Azerbaijan is our home, and Tractor is our grey wolf.” The grey wolf, a symbol of Turkish nationalism, is regarded as a sacred animal in Turkic mythology, symbolizing pride, bravery, and strength. According to the legend of Asena, which recounts the origins of the Turkic people, a she-wolf in the Central Asian steppes nursed a boy who had been abandoned after his family was massacred in a raid. The she-wolf later gave birth to his half-human, half-wolf offspring, from whom the Turkic people descended. Altogether, these stories and symbols help Tractor fans, and Azeris in general, to construct an ethnic myth of ancestry alternative to Aryanism as the well-accepted historical narrative for all Iranians regardless of their ethnic background, which emphasizes the country’s ancient pre-Islamic Persian heritage, including its language, culture, and Zoroastrian religion. Though academically rejected, Aryanism, with pride in pre-Islamic Persian history, has been sustained in popular discourses and has had an undeniable influence on Iranian identity from the mid-nineteenth century onwards.

Tractor fans often chant the names of geographical locations and historical sites that are symbolic of Azeri identity, such as Mount Savalan, River Aras, and Lake Urmia. Banners and flags bearing the names and pictures of these places are also waved with fervor in the stadium. Furthermore, cities with predominantly Azeri populations and the club itself are often regarded as symbols for all Azeris, as heard in the chant: “Urmia, Zanjan, Ardabil, this is the voice from/of Azerbaijan.” These references provide a concrete and tangible aspect of the imagined Azeri identity, adding a geopolitical dimension to ethnic identity formation. The homeland and its iconic geographical
landscapes connect the past with the present, making history more meaningful with a sense of place. References to “the roaring of River Aras,” “the silvery charm of Lake Urmia,” and “the magnificence of Mount Sahand,” create not only an attachment to Azerbaijan but also a feeling of intimacy and loyalty to the homeland. Out of this inherent love for the homeland also grows a desire to defend it and protect its people. Consider the following song, which is chanted cheerfully by Tractor fans:

I am proud of my homeland
Long live Azerbaijan!
Our young people are with you
Long live Azerbaijan!
If you call me, I will come running
Long live Azerbaijan!
Come what may, I would even die for you
Long live Azerbaijan!

Further, Tractor fans have a unique way of expressing their Azeri identity through the name they have given to their home stadium. Although it was officially named Yadegar-e Imam in 1996, after Ahmad Khomeini, the younger son of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his right-hand man, Tractor fans prefer to call it Sahand, after one of the highest mountains in Azerbaijan. Mount Sahand holds a special place in the hearts of Azeris, and Tractor fans take pride in using this name. They view the imposition of the official name as an example of Tehran’s discriminatory mentality and as an attempt to undermine Azeri culture by replacing local names with authorized Persian ones as part of a state-led project to push towards ethnolinguistic homogeneity.

In the stadium, there are also slogans promoting Pan-Turkism, although this ideology is often condemned and suppressed by state authorities, nationalist writers, and thinkers who view it as a false identity created by enemies to distort Iranian history and isolate Azeris. Tractor fans shout slogans, calling for political unity between Turkic states, such as “Tabriz, Baku, Ankara, our path leads elsewhere than the path of the Persians,” or for union with the Republic of Azerbaijan, such as “Long live a free Azerbaijan” and “Azerbaijan should be a single country, with Tabriz as its capital.” Additionally, fans occasionally display flags of Southern Azerbaijan, the Republic of Azerbaijan, and Turkey, and wear shirts featuring the Turkish and Azerbaijan flags. The Grey Wolf hand gesture is often accompanied by a military salute to the Turkish flag, and fans also chant Pan-Turkic slogans like “Azerbaijan is ours; Afghanistan is yours.” All these actions indicate a growing trend towards Tractor fans identifying more strongly as Turks.

The Pan-Turkic rhetoric used in these slogans, banners, and flags imbues Tractor fans with a distinct secessionist character, as they connect Southern Azerbaijan, its flag, and other symbols to an alternative interpretation and narrative of history. The term Southern Azerbaijan is based on a Pan-Turkist narrative about the historical existence of a united Azerbaijan on both sides of the Aras River, which was divided following the Perso-Russian wars of 1826–1828 between these two neighboring empires. The Pan-Turkist narrative legitimizes the demand for the unification of the two politically separated regions and the creation of a free, independent Azerbaijan nation-state for all Azeris. It goes beyond the less contentious demand for a federal political structure in Iran that grants self-rule to minorities, including Azeris, within the framework of the Iranian nation-state.

Not all of the Azeri rhetoric is positive, however. The slogans of Tractor fans exhibit a hostile and aggressive tone towards other Iranians and even non-Persian minorities, such as Kurds. Chauvinistic statements, including “Down with Persian fascism,” “To hell with those who do not like us,” “Long live Azerbaijan, the ill-wishers of Azerbaijan are doomed,” and “Down with Kurds,” blame non-Azeri people for the sustained Persian-centric discriminatory order over the last century. Persians are viewed as the first “others” responsible for suppressing the Azeri language and culture. Azeri national folklore and symbolism are deliberately articulated in contrast to the Persian “other.” The Azeris are depicted as a nation and a nationality that has historically
resisted the nationalist narrative of Iranianness with its overemphasis on Persian heritage and language. The Kurds and their claims over western Azerbaijan are also perceived as a threat to Azeri territoriality and identity, creating a differentiation between Azeris and Kurds. Narratives of interethnic conflict are repeatedly recounted to strengthen Azeri nationalism against neighbouring Kurds.

Conclusion

As a complex and dynamic phenomenon, the relationship between sport and nationalism has long fascinated social scientists and politicians. While the forces of globalization were once thought to diminish the importance of nationalism and weaken its relationship with sport, this connection has actually been reinforced in recent years. Sports continue to be a powerful catalyst for nationalist sentiments and identities. In many cases, a nation’s sporting pursuits are as defining as its politics, economy, and culture, as seen in the recent example of Qatar hosting the World Cup. The tournament is a crucial part of Qatar’s state-led project to foster national pride, gain legitimacy, and create a sense of belonging among its citizens. The successful hosting of the 2022 World Cup served as a way for the nation to demonstrate its geopolitical power and economic prosperity, while also strengthening its image on the world stage.

Sport acts as a common thread woven through society to connect individuals. It presents a foundation upon which national consciousness can be built. It is a fertile ground for constructing national identity and perpetuating an imagined community in which individuals who may never meet can identify with their national team and with each other. However, just as sport represents a professed national unity, its can also become a medium for more profound social and political discontent over the state of national identity, particularly an outlet for minority resentment towards the dominant national identity narrative. Sports gatherings provide a relatively safe space for expressing otherwise repressed views and discontent; they become a site of contestation, identity claims, and nationalist performance where unrepresented minorities can wave their flags, sing their songs, and speak in their mother tongues. This study examined this use of sport as a medium of expressing repressed ethnic feelings by demonstrating how a football club, Tractor SC, founded in Tabriz and supported by Azeri ethnic minorities in Iran, goes beyond mere entertainment and athletics and becomes an effective medium for disseminating ethnic resentment and feelings.

In recent years, Iranian Azeris have increasingly voiced their desire to protect their ethnic identity, culture, and language. Tractor fans have taken advantage of Sahand Stadium, a previously neutral location, to express their beliefs in the uniqueness of Azeri ethnicity and even nationality. Through slogans, songs, and banners, Tractor fans celebrate the Azeri language and advocate for its use in Iran, as well as their right to education in their mother tongue. Additionally, they pay tribute to fallen Azeri heroes and recall their stories as an alternative ethnic narrative of the past to reinforce ethnic sentiment. The fans also proudly shout the names of iconic geographical locations symbolizing Azeri identity and enthusiastically display banners and flags bearing the names and images of these iconic sites. Tractor fans’ expressions of Pan-Azeri and Pan-Turkic sentiments, which sometimes have a chauvinistic tone, advocate for a cultural or even political union among all Turkic peoples. Collectively, these songs, slogans, and banners serve as symbolic resources that represent an ethnic alternative to the prevailing nationalistic narrative of Iranian identity. The club has become a significant badge of ethnic identity, providing fans with a set of linguistic and symbolic representations that help to maintain and reproduce their distinct sense of identity. It also contributes to the social process of defining the Azeri self and non-Azeri other, creating an “us versus them” mentality. In this way, Tractor fans use the club as an effective means of cultural resistance to celebrate Azeri identity in opposition to the Persian-centric narrative of Iranian nationalism.
Endnotes


6 Patrick Keddie, The Passion: Football and the Story of Modern Turkey (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018); also see Secen's article in this collection.

7 See Ryan's article in this volume.


10 Asgharzadeh, Iran and the Challenge of Diversity.

11 I.R.R. Constitution, Article XV.

12 Hugh Poulton, The Top Hat, the Grey Wolf, and the Crescent: Turkish Nationalism and the Turkish Republic (New York: New York University Press, 1997).
The Rise of Gulf States’ Investments in Sports: Neither Soft Power nor Sportswashing?

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Mansour bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) owns Manchester City; Nasser al-Khulaifi of Qatar owns Paris-Saint Germain (PSG); Abdullah bin Masaad of Saudi Arabia owns Sheffield United; Infinity Capital of Bahrain owns Córdoba Club de Fútbol; Qatar Airways partners with numerous soccer clubs, most famously with PSG; Emirates Airlines has partnered with Manchester City and Real Madrid; and Hamad bin Khalifa al-Nahyan of the UAE recently proposed to buy a fifty percent stake in Beitar Jerusalem Football club, which has been linked to the far right in Israel. Reporting on these partnerships, Brand Finance noted that “half of the top 10 football club brands are benefiting from Arabian Gulf investment in sponsorship and ownership.”

Why are Gulf states increasingly investing in sports, especially international top-tier football clubs, and how do such investments benefit Gulf nations? This paper situates the Gulf at the intersection of sports and politics to inspect the collective rising interest in sports among Gulf states, mainly Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. This study presents the forms through which these sports interests are manifest, and explores the drivers underlying such investment. It argues that intra-Gulf competition, soft power, sportswashing, and economic diversification are all motives of Gulf states’ investments in local and international sports and their hosting of international sporting events.

Europe as an Epicenter of Sport Investment

States and governments around the world have long controlled sports and clubs, instrumentalizing them for diplomatic ends, including for purposes of propaganda, prestige, foreign relations, and recognition in the international arena. For example, the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games in Nazi Germany and the 1972 Munich Summer Games were used as attempts to magnify German pride both locally and in the world, and contributed to delivering particular political messages. Similarly, the 1995 South African Rugby World Cup signaled an important political message regarding the end of Apartheid, as did the 2000 Sydney Summer Olympic Games when the state publicly regretted the treatment of Australia’s Aboriginal people. For China, hosting the 2008 Olympic Games was an opportunity to redefine its image worldwide at a time when the country was emerging as a global economic power.

For a long time, non-democratic countries were unconcerned about embracing the international diplomacy of sport, and did not see its value in terms of diplomacy and generating immediate benefits. However, over the past two decades, interest in sports emanating from unconventional stakeholders has been on the rise. The wealthy Gulf states, looking to diversify their hydrocarbon economies, have found welcome in the cash-hungry international sports sector. In 2010, at a time when the Gulf states were not necessarily leaders in the field of sports, Sepp Blatter, the former President of FIFA (1998–2015), announced that “We go to new lands” with Qatar’s winning bid to host the 2022 World Cup. Similarly, other countries such as Belarus, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda, and Azerbaijan have demonstrated a recent interest in sports.

The Gulf states’ particular interest in European football clubs stems from these teams’ significant financial performance determined by liquidity, leverage, and sporting performance. European football clubs are increasingly profitable businesses. Figure 1 lists the revenues football club investors can expect to gain from “matchday sales, stadium hiring fees, sponsorship deals,
Figure 1: Revenue of Professional League Football Clubs in 2022 (in million U.S. dollars)

Figure 2: Operating Income of Professional League Football Clubs in 2022 (in million U.S. dollars)
merchandise sales, TV broadcasting deals, prize money, and player transfers.” These statistics demonstrate that a football club can be profitable even if it does not win trophies. Among the top twenty European football clubs shown in Figures 1 and 2, Gulf states invested in at least eight: the UAE invested in Manchester City, Real Madrid, Manchester United, Arsenal F.C., and AC Milan; and Qatar invested in FC Barcelona, Bayern Munich, and Paris Saint-Germain. The Gulf states’ investment in sports, especially in European football, represents a remarkable economic opportunity, as well as the more symbolic benefits of nation branding.

Forms of Gulf State Sports Investments

Association Football was founded in English public schools in the nineteenth century. In 1904, European Football Associations founded FIFA as the governing body of football globally, with the first World Cup tournament held in 1930. While the history of institutionalized sports in the Gulf region tends to be relatively recent in global terms, and while some argue that Gulf countries lack a footballing culture, the game is deeply rooted in terms of the history of the countries themselves, with many Football Associations in the Gulf first established along with the founding of the states: Saudi Arabia in 1956, Bahrain in 1957, Qatar in 1960, UAE in 1971, and Oman in 1978. More recently, in the 2000s, Gulf states’ increased interest in sports at local and international levels became institutionalized in their various modernization projects. These were enshrined in national state “vision” policies aimed at achieving infrastructure investments, diversified industries, business-friendly environments, and improved productivity. Various local factors have contributed to Gulf state investments in national and international sports, including prosperous hydrocarbon economies that have been used to “diversify state revenues by developing and promoting other industries, for instance tourism and industries related to hospitality, real estates, retail sectors, technology, communication, and finance.”

Most Gulf state investments in international sports takes the form of sponsoring or investing in foreign clubs, and seeking membership or leadership of regional and international sports federations. Sports revenues, especially from European football clubs, have acted as a motivation for Gulf states’ international investments, and their hosting of international tournaments are both an economic diversification strategy and a way of positioning the Gulf countries more prominently in the world. The UAE became the first Gulf state to invest in a foreign club when the Abu Dhabi United Group bought Manchester City at the end of 2008 for $360 million. The Royal Emirates Group invested £90 million in Getafe CF in 2011, and Fly Emirates sponsored Real Madrid in 2017 with $336 million. In Saudi Arabia, businessman Ali al-Faraj invested a 90 percent stake in Portsmouth Football Club in 2009. In 2011, Qatar purchased Paris Saint-Germain, which then bought some of the best players in the world, including Zlatan Ibrahimovic, Neymar da Silva Santos Jr, and Kylian Mbappé. Qatar also invested in Malaga FC and KAS Eupen. Capitalizing on such endeavors allowed Qatar “to set a training strategy where young Qatari players can train and compete at the best European level.” Qatar also sponsored FC Bayern Munich, Paris Saint-Germain, Club Atlético Boca Juniors, and AS Roma, and became an official FIFA partner, sponsoring global competitions such as the Club World Cup, the World Cup, and the eWorld Cup. More recently, the Raine Group, responsible for the sale of Manchester United, contacted the Qataris to see if they might be interested in buying the club, and Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani responded by submitting three bids to buy the club, the final one in late April 2023. As a means of advancing nation branding, some Gulf countries became known due to their names appearing on sporting t-shirts. Between 2013–2017, Qatar became the kit sponsor of FC Barcelona with Qatar Foundation, and later with Qatar Airways; and Emirates Airlines made contracts with seven European football clubs, with its logo appearing on the jerseys of Arsenal F.C., Real Madrid CF, A.C. Milan, Paris Saint-Germain, Hamburger SV, Olympiacos F.C., and S.L. Benfica. Etihad Airways also sponsored Manchester City, New York City FC, and Mumbai Indians cricket team.

In Europe, country-specific regulations and national structural factors can facilitate or hinder Gulf state
investments in sports, which are evident in the pattern of where these investments are located geographically. Gulf investors are mostly attracted to the Premier League, La Liga, and Ligue 1, which offer more flexible ownership structures than some other European countries. Regulations in Germany, for instance, are “very different to those in Spain, the UK, and France due to the 50+1 rule that stipulates that a club must retain at least 51 percent of shares in its professional football team.”28 As opposed to Germany, where foreign investment is limited to ensure the stability of ticket prices—which would rise if the game was commercialized—Gulf investments in England are attributed to the “levelling up agenda” intended to reduce economic inequality between the southeast and the English peripheries, with enhanced capital flows from the Gulf states.29 This is not to say that Gulf states are bound to or interested in local British initiatives, but that Gulf capital flows will act as a way through which the British government can claim the success of its proposed initiative—an opportunity that is likely to be seized by the Gulf states. Therefore, external factors, such as sports ownership structures, can act as motivations or as disincentives for Gulf states to invest in sports in certain countries.

Gulf States Hosting International Sporting Events

The Gulf countries have increasingly invested in various spectator sports that require major organization and arrangements. Qatar’s hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, and the Saudi joint bid with Egypt and Greece for the 2030 World Cup, focused international attention on the growing role of Gulf states as hosts of major international sporting events. Since 2005, Qatar has become host to such large-scale sports events with unprecedented frequency compared to other countries in the history of modern sport,30 hosting around 500 international sporting events.31 The UAE, for its part, hosted the 2003 FIFA World Youth Championship; the 2009 FIFA Club World Cup was played in Dubai;32 and, in 2019, the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) was hosted in Abu Dhabi, with an agreement to host UFC events for the next five years.33 Not only have Gulf countries become hosts for major football tournaments, but have also focused on attracting other elite spectator sports—such as golf, cycling, horse racing, and sailing—that tend to be of interest to more affluent attendees.34 In 2004, Bahrain hosted the Formula One World Championship, becoming the first country in the Middle East to host the tournament. More recently, in January and February 2023, the UAE hosted at least four international golf tournaments: the Hero Cup (January 13–15); HSBC Golf Championship (January 19–22); Hero Dubai Desert Classic (January 26–29); and Golf Ras Al Khaimah Classic (February 2–5).

In 2016, Saudi Arabia woke up to the significance of sport, positioning it as a crucial aspect of Mohammed bin Salman’s 2030 national vision.35 The kingdom hosted the Supercopa de España in 2018, 2019, and 2022. Since 2019, it hosted the annual European golf tour and Diriyah ePrix Formula E race, and, since 2020, hosted the annual Dakar Rally.36 In 2018, the World Wrestling Entertainment announced a 10-year strategic partnership with the Saudi General Sports Authority, which includes hosting pay-per-view events in Saudi Arabia and holding two large-scale events in the country every year.37 Further, the ARAMCO Saudi Ladies International golf tournament was funded by the Public Investment Fund, which also financed LIV Golf at the Centurion Club near London. With Saudi’s recent efforts to invest in national and international sports, who would have ever imagined that Cristiano Ronaldo, the football legend, would become a player in the Saudi Pro League? Despite rumors that he wants to leave Al-Nassr Club of Saudi Arabia,38 Ronaldo represented a turning point in Saudi’s rising interest on the local context rather than just on the international stage. In the sudden and exponential Saudi openness to sports, Lionel Messi is also anticipated to join Al-Hilal club of Saudi Arabia after PSG’s season ends on June 3, 2023.39

Investing in National Sports Infrastructure

Alongside international sports investments, the Gulf states have significantly enhanced their national sports sectors by building sports infrastructure, attracting
well-known international players and coaches to local teams, establishing monopoly over games broadcasting rights, and competing in regional and international tournaments. The Gulf states have also placed increasing emphasis on indigenous and traditional sports from the region, with camel racing and falconry as leading heritage sports sponsored and developed by state efforts. All Gulf countries have a history of camel racing competitions, the largest of which, according to the Guinness World Records, was organized by the Saudi Camel Racing Federation in 2019 with 13,377 camels. Similarly, various falconry competitions have been organized, such as the Fazza Championship for Falconry in UAE, which have gained tremendous popularity, leading to an increase in state funds for these tournaments. Aimed at attracting younger generations to the heritage sport, the Qatari Society of Al Gannas organizes a National Day Falconry Championship competitions, consisting of the young falconer competition and the promising falconer competition.

Gulf states have made concerted efforts to invest in youth and women’s participation in sports. Qatar’s Aspire Academy trains young talents in various sports and treats their sports-related injuries at the Aspetar hospital. Such Gulf investments in national sports have paid off and national teams continue to excel. The Saudi national football team’s victory over Argentina during one of the 2022 World Cup matches, led to fervent national pride, with King Salman declaring a snap public holiday to celebrate the team’s success. Similarly, Qatar has scored victories in multiple tournaments, including the 2019 AFC Asian Cup, a total of five medals in the Olympics over the country’s history, and a second place in the handball World Cup in 2015, proving that investment in national sports can lead to international accomplishments. Regarding greater participation of women in sports, in the 2012 London Olympic Games, a Qatari woman, Bahiya Al-Hamad, became the first Qatari female competitor at the Olympics and the bearer of her country’s flag, and, in 2019, another Qatari woman, Mariam Farid, was named ambassador of her country’s bid to host the World Athletics Championships. Further, Saudi Arabia launched its first women’s football league in October 2019, and, in December 2022, submitted an official bid to host the AFC Women’s Asian Cup in 2026.

Another way in which the Gulf states attempt to build their national sports infrastructure and reflect a more positive image of themselves abroad is their orientation toward “state-funded international broadcaster coverage of sports megaevents [that] can generate a soft power effect with audiences, even when the host state […] has a poor international reputation.” Qatar’s BeIN network has secured exclusive sports broadcasting contracts in the Middle East and North Africa region as well as other parts of the world to screen the Olympic Games, the FIFA World Cup, and various other major international championships. While Qatar’s dominance over sports media has led to an increase in its soft power capabilities, it has raised concerns in the region, mainly from Saudi Arabia. The BeOutQ, a hacking network that hijacked Qatari BeIN signals, began broadcasting out of the kingdom in August 2017, reflecting the sensitivity, conflict, and competition regarding monopoly over games broadcasting rights and soft power projections.

**Gulf Sport Investments: Beyond Soft Power?**

Soft power acquisition can also be used to explain how Gulf states approach sports. Soft power is a concept coined by Joseph Nye to explain how some states acquire influence. Gulf state interest in sports investments can be explained by intra-Gulf rivalries, where competition rather than cooperation between Gulf states has been a key driver. For instance, when Saudi and the UAE capitalized on anti-Qatar media coverage, leading an aggressive campaign to strip Qatar of the FIFA World Cup during the 2017–2021 Gulf crisis, Qatar’s international sports investments became a way of ensuring national security, sovereignty, economic independence, and soft power projections. For Qatar, “football, with its emotive fanbase, global popularity, and capital-heavy investment opportunities, is also a key area for competing narratives around which reputations and visions of Gulf regimes are constructed in the international arena.”
However, while soft power can give a Gulf state privileged access to practice international lobbying, it does not necessarily enhance a state's reputation, especially in the face of hostile international media coverage. Sport may better be understood as a passage to practicing soft power rather than being a soft power in itself. On a national level, Gulf leaders capitalize on sports investments to enhance a state’s reputation locally and represent ways of acquiring legitimacy of achievements before its citizens. This was mostly evident in the way that Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani framed Qatar’s hosting of the World Cup as an achievement for the state, as well as for Arabs and Islam more generally, tweeting: “We fulfilled our promise at organizing an exceptional championship in an Arab country, which provided an opportunity for people in the world to explore the richness of our culture and the authenticity of our values.”

A less sympathetic reading of Gulf states’ sports investments is that these countries are engaging in a form of sportswashing, a term identified by Simon Chadwick as referring to “regimes that use mega-sports events to reboot their reputations and distract audiences from their horrific human-rights records.” Russia’s hosting of the 2018 World Cup, for instance, did not succeed in changing the generally negative view of the country. With its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia was placed under international sports sanctions that affected its foreign investments, such as the British government freezing the sale of FC Chelsea, owned by Roman Abramovich, who is considered close to Russian President Vladimir Putin. Similarly, Saudi Arabia has been accused of using sports to “upgrade its public image and distract from its recent abuses, including the infamous assassination of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi and its devastating war in Yemen.” The Saudi takeover of Newcastle Football Club sparked protests by the club’s fans, and the 2018 Superclásico Championship in Saudi Arabia did not divert attention away from the murder of Khashoggi. In the same vein, the 2011 Grand Prix did not cover up the civil unrest in Bahrain, and various human rights organizations are still directing criticisms at Stefano Domenicali, the current CEO of Formula 1, and raising concerns over the tournament’s ongoing role in sportswashing amidst a deterioration in Bahrain’s human rights record. For its part, Qatar faced fierce media attacks before and during the World Cup 2022, and at the final when Lionel Messi was adorned with the Qatari traditional bisht as he lifted the trophy. Qatar has challenged accusations of sportswashing, asserting that hosting the World Cup 2022 aimed at challenging “stereotypes about Qataris, Arabs and Muslims.” Thus, when sport is a mirror of politics or becomes an arena in which politics is played, it does little to uphold the unifying spirit that sports is meant to evoke. Instead, the stadium becomes a space for a clash of civilizations. Thus, it is important to focus on the effect of politics on Gulf investments in sports instead of exclusively focusing on the effect of sports investments on politics.

This article has attempted to answer the question: Why are Gulf states increasingly investing in sports, especially international top-tier football clubs, and how do such investments benefit Gulf nations? By examining the rising interest in sports among Gulf states, mainly Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia, this study argues that intra-Gulf competition, soft power, sportswashing, and economic diversification have all been motives of Gulf states’ investments in local and international sports. However, as this study has demonstrated, investing in sports, especially international sports, does not always guarantee profit, soft power, or a positive reputation. Soft power concerns are often used to explain Gulf investments in sports, but the effects of such power can be limited. While Gulf states’ sports investments are intended to raise the profile of these countries, their interests in sports have often been harshly criticized by fans and the international media. Despite these challenges, investing in sport has raised the international profiles of Gulf states and given them significant influence in the arena of international sports. These investments also play a key role in strengthening national prestige and national identity when a Gulf state successfully organizes a championship or achieves a sporting victory.


See the article by Marc Owen Jones in this volume.


Political Contestation around the “Football in Cinema” Project in Iran

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The ban on women’s football spectatorship in Iran has become a durable element of the self-visualization of the Islamic regime, yet it has never been formalized in the form of a law. Women’s presence inside football stadiums as spectators of men’s matches has been problematized largely on the grounds that it is religiously unacceptable and renders women vulnerable to physical and verbal abuse. The durability of the ban, however, does not imply that its status and rationales have been kept outside the realm of political negotiation and contestation. Different actors within and outside the state have implicated the ban in their competition for political power or economic advantage and rendered it a stage on which political battles are fought. In this article, I explore the ways in which political contestations are mapped onto, and further politicize, everyday sports and entertainment spaces. To do so, I focus on the case of the “football in cinema” project to highlight the multipolarity of the complex terrain of conflict and negotiation among female football fans, cinema owners and managers, movie producers, and various state officials and organizations. The article follows how the disputes over women’s football spectatorship and their access to football stadiums has spilled over into other spaces, such as cinemas, cafés, and restaurants, where football has been livestreamed. It explores the ways in which gender, political, and economic interests fuse and collide to give these spaces unique shapes and meanings.

**Football Comes to the Silver Screen**

Various administrations and political actors have expressed criticism of Iran’s ban on women’s sports spectatorship over the years, particularly over women’s exclusion from Azadi Stadium, the largest sports complex in Tehran where most national matches are played.1 Ironically, the most decisive challenge to the ban came from within the conservative administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), who had otherwise been known as an advocate of gender discriminatory practices. In 2006, Ahmadinejad broke with the position of Iran’s Supreme Leader and the clerical establishment by issuing a directive that obliged the Physical Education Organization to facilitate women’s entrance into football stadiums, in designated seating sections in line with the gender segregation regime. The clerical establishment that had been supporting the ban saw Ahmadinejad’s directive as an attempt to curb their power. They, thus, mobilized to rebuke Ahmadinejad, until the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, intervened to force him to revoke his directive. The controversy was rekindled in mid-2010, almost a year after the Green Movement and the contested reelection of Ahmadinejad as president of the Islamic Republic2 when, in an attempt to shore up his legitimacy and regain the lost ground in his confrontation with the clerical establishment, he raised the issue of women’s exclusion from football stadiums once more, this time by proposing to bring the concluding World Cup football matches to the silver screen, as cinema spaces, unlike stadiums, were open to mixed gender audiences. In July 2010, enthusiastic, yet apprehensive crowds of spectators flocked into Tehran’s cineplexes to watch the 2010 World Cup concluding matches as the Supreme Leader, the clerical establishment and the state appurtenances accountable to them watched the experiment closely.

In January 2011, a few months after this initial experiment, Ahmadinejad’s administration together with the conservative-led Tehran municipality - the owner of major cineplexes in the city – saw in the success of the experiment and in the popularity of football an opportunity to compensate for an alarmingly declining movie attendance rate and decided to screen more international matches in movie theaters. Although the rationale behind this decision was largely financial,3 the
initiative was soon to be embroiled in a whirlwind of political contestation.

On January 20, 2011, Tehran’s major cineplexes, including Azadi and Mellat cineplexes, welcomed both male and female fans to a live screening of the AFC Asian Cup group stage match between Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Soon after the screening, cinema managers were summoned by the National Police Force, and were allegedly asked to restrict these events to male spectators and to prohibit women from entering theaters when football matches were screened. Pointing out the hierarchical accountability in state administration, however, the Deputy Director of Tehran Municipality’s Cineplex Affairs, Amirhossein Alamolhoda, stated that “cinemas are under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance [and not the police],” and so cinema managers “shall wait and see what [the Ministry] instructs them to do.” The conflict between the police (whose head is appointed by, and therefore accountable to, the Supreme Leader) and the Ministry of Culture (whose head is appointed by, and therefore accountable to, the president) culminated in an impasse and the screenings were suspended. The next day, fans retreated to their living rooms to watch Iran’s match against South Korea on their TV screens.

A year later, the controversy resurfaced. During the 2012 UEFA European Championship, football fans were offered a ray of hope. On June 7, the vice president of the Association of Cinema Owners, Gholamreza Faraji, announced that fourteen cinemas across Tehran would screen select matches. Unhappy with this announcement, Iran’s chief of police, Esmail Ahmadi-Moghadam, stated that it would be illegal to screen matches if cinema managers did not observe “the rules of gender segregation” and divide the cinema space between men and women. Interestingly, the “rules” evoked by the chief of police had never applied to movie theaters, where film screenings had been uncontroversial and enjoyed by mixed gender publics. Exploring the reasons for this differential treatment requires venturing into the realm of speculation. Yet, the original concerns about women’s entrance into football stadiums—and the atmosphere engendered by the effervescence of fans’ passionate behavior seen as a threat to the maintenance of gender boundaries—seem to have been instrumentalized in the “football in cinema” controversies in the pursuit of political gain. Attempting to turn individual acts of refusal into a collective voice, the deputy director of the Cinema Organization of Iran, a subdivision of the Ministry of Culture, Alireza Sajjadpoor, requested that cinema owners and managers send their requests for screening permits through the ministry, rather than individually approaching the police: “We decide which theater is suitable for the screening and we negotiate on their behalf and as a collective.” Again, this reflected an institutional power struggle: Ahmadinejad’s Ministry of Culture was effectively struggling to consolidate its position and share of state power and to get a relative advantage in its negotiations with the police—and, by extension, with the Supreme Leader. The political battle between elements within the state, nonstate actors, and the clerics was now being fought in a different field. If the doors of Azadi Stadium, which Ahmadinejad had tried to breach during his first term in office, could not be opened, he was now set to flex his muscles by opening the doors of Azadi Cineplex.

With the Euro Cup finals around the corner, Sajjadpoor, from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, asserted that it was only the ministry that was responsible and held accountable for what goes on in movie theaters. Consequently, the Ministry of Culture, in coordination with Tehran Municipality, screened football matches in movie theaters that were prepared and equipped to do so. Nonetheless, as people sat in their seats to watch the first match, the police raided theaters in Mellat and Zendegi cineplexes, dispersed the crowd, and shut down the buildings. The clerics congratulated the police for their “manly” intervention. The head of the Cinema Organization of Iran, a subdivision of the Ministry of Culture, Javad Shamaghdari, criticized the police for “acting as if they [were] above the law.” In this and other statements, references and appeals to “the law” were used to juxtapose the authority of the elected administration (situated “within the law”) with that of the Supreme Leader, the clerical establishment, and the state officials appointed by and accountable only to the Leader, who
normally operate “above” the law. Despite these skirmishes, Ahmadinejad reached the end of his term but his last attempt at scoring a political goal was blocked by a joint defense from the police and the clerics.

**Competing Claims and Contested Spaces**

With the reformist Hassan Rouhani assuming the presidency in 2013, a new phase in the controversy over football screenings in theaters began. As the doors of Azadi Stadium remained closed to women, Rouhani’s administration also attempted to shift the focus away from the stadium and toward the cinema space. With Iran winning a ticket to the 2014 World Cup, the “football in cinema” project was back on the table. This time, the proponents of the project adopted a non-confrontational approach, as evidenced in a statement made in April 2014 by one of the Tehran municipality officials, Seyyed Hadi Monabbati, who encouraged the police to stand by, and not against, the people: “Iran is present in the World Cup and what cinema owners are requesting has a national dimension. This is a national matter, and it would be better for the police to stand by the people and help us materialize our national sentiments.” He concluded by reassuring that “the services and the presence of the dutiful members of the police” were still needed for maintaining order and security inside the theaters. The strategy elevated the issue of access to theaters to a matter of national importance (instead of a demand of a particular segment of society) and, rather than ignoring or excluding the police, recognized them as key players, and thus stakeholders. The Social, Cultural, and Sports Committee of Tehran Municipality subsequently approved and planned for the screening of World Cup matches in various venues, and in select parks.

Not all social groups were pleased with the proposal to screen football matches in theaters, as the initiative provoked new social actors to step forward with competing demands. As cinema managers attempted to attract more viewers by investing in the public’s love of football, some film producers and directors, such as Jahangir Kosari, called this initiative “an insult to art and cinema and a slap on the face of culture.” Film producers were unhappy about the blurring of the boundary between “high” and “low” culture; between the arts (where, in their opinion, their films belonged) and sports spaces, and also, about the implications of institutionalizing screening matches in theaters as far as the status of their movies and their revenues were concerned.

Either way, as in previous years, the screening of the matches was canceled just before the World Cup. Amir Hooshang Pasbanian, manager of Esteghlal Cinema, claimed the initiative was blocked by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Iran’s national TV, whose head is appointed directly by the Leader and is independent of the administration, as Channel 3 of the Iranian TV had bought the 2014 World Cup broadcasting rights and refused to allow cinemas to use its feed.

Against this background of protracted acrimony between the elected administrations and the officials appointed by, and accountable to the Supreme Leader, the cancelation of the scheduled events did not come as a surprise. Several restaurants and cafés had anticipated it and stepped in to fill the gap, using text message marketing to inform Irancell subscribers that their venues would be hosting a series of World Cup match screenings. Restaurant spaces were filling the vacuum created by the restrictions set on women’s sports spectatorship but, more importantly, by the rivalry between different political factions. As these formerly unregulated spaces grew popular, the police stepped in to control them. According to the head of the Association of Coffee Shop Owners, Eskandar Azmoodeh, during World Cup matches, cafés were required to either turn off their TVs or switch to a channel not showing football matches, or otherwise could have their permits revoked by the police. Coffee-shop owners refused to comply and found ways around the regulations: they either hired a watchman (beppa in Farsi) or “gave the police their share [bribed them]” for looking the other way. This, however, was a temporary solution, as the public screening of football remained a thorny issue in Iranian politics.

Iran’s presence in the 2018 World Cup held in Russia
was a source of national joy, hope, and pride, but also of frustration. Rouhani’s reformist administration, having ended its first term in a stalemate with conservative factions, saw in football the opportunity to regain relevance. After years of political bickering about the possibility of screening the matches in movie theaters, and the short-term stopgap of using cafés, a new idea emerged: live streaming of football matches on huge screens inside the Azadi Stadium. This idea came particularly as a means of deflecting the negative publicity that the ban on women’s sports spectatorship had on both the domestic and international fronts. After extended negotiations, Tehran’s chief of police said that the police were not against citizens’ happiness and welcomed any program that would cheer them up, stressing however that their (unspecified) conditions should be met.13

On 20 June 2018, the gates of Azadi Stadium were finally opened to “families,” meaning men and women together. Ten thousand people gathered inside the stadium to watch, not a live football game, but the televised match between Iran and Spain. Later, social media was filled with pictures of happy Iranians watching the match in Azadi Stadium and an array of open-air spaces across the country. Despite Iran’s defeat in the football match against Spain, various presses declared Iranian fans as “the real winners.”14 The reformist head of the Parliament Women, Sports and Youth Committee, Tayyebeh Siavoshi, who attended the screening herself, referred to the World Cup as “a wonderful occasion for the government to create social cohesion and national solidarity, especially at a time, when people are facing all sorts of problems in the domestic as well as at international scenes.”15 Indeed, broadcasting football inside Azadi Stadium was symbolically important and earned Rouhani’s reformist administration a win on the international stage. Various media outlets celebrated “the U-turn” by Iranian officials,16 and even Human Rights Watch praised Iran for “steps in the right direction.”17

Despite the apparent symbolic breakthrough achieved by the Rouhani administration, the gates of Azadi Stadium did not remain open for women and the ban proved to be more durable than one would have thought.

The Beautiful Game in Times of Crises

Attention to the ban was rekindled on September 2, 2019 when Sahar Khodayari, a 29-year-old woman, set herself on fire outside a Tehran courthouse where she was to appear on charges of attempting to enter Azadi Stadium dressed as a man. On October 10, 2019, in the midst of domestic and international outcry over the death of Sahar Khodayari, the Rouhani administration opened the gates of Azadi stadium to female spectators for the World Cup qualifying match between Iran and Cambodia, allocating to them a mere 3,500 seats out of a total of 80,000.18 The incredible women to men ratio effectively betrayed the lack of will to go beyond small symbolic acts. As the dust settled, the doors were shut again and, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of access to stadiums for both male and female spectators became a moot point.

By the time the pandemic was over and Iran qualified for the 2022 World Cup, a new, conservative administration under President Raisi had come to office. In September 2022, as Iran’s national team was preparing for the World Cup tournament in Qatar, the “Women, Life, Freedom” protests that followed Mahsa Jina Amini’s death at the hands of the morality police, and the violent repression with which they were met, introduced a new element in the debates around football spectatorship.19 The protests led to a period of heightened securitization, especially when it came to public gatherings (including those related to attending sports events) as the regime wanted to curtail opportunities for the spreading of the protests. Furthermore, the national team itself became embroiled in controversy as critics of the regime inside and outside Iran pushed initially for the cancellation of the Iranian team’s participation in the games and, later on, called on the players to “disown” the regime, or refuse to play, or urged the Iranian public to disown the team, boycott its matches and screenings, and not celebrate any of its wins.20 Football was in crisis. Meanwhile, cinema managers drew attention to another crisis, pointing out their shrinking revenues as a result of the protests. Ali Sartipi, manager of Kourosh Cineplex, expressed concerns about what he labeled as an “unprecedented crisis,” recalling that even during the Iran–
Iraq war (1980–1988), and Iraq’s bombing raids, people would still queue outside movie theaters to watch films. Under these circumstances, cinema owners, once again, turned to football, seeing a lifeline in the possible screening of matches. New and time-rehearsed arguments were mobilized to support the screening of matches, including the expectation that football screenings would entice even those who were not looking for “high culture” into movie theaters and would “hopefully” encourage them to return. It was also suggested that such occasions would foster conviviality and help counter the depression induced by the political and economic malaise, and, finally, that getting people into the cinemas, where their excitement could be contained, was a much better option than letting them congregate in the country’s volatile streets where “hooligans” might create chaos. What we see in this argumentation is the cinema owners’ attempt to tie their economic interests to the political interests of the regime, and the imperative of containing the protests and maintaining order.

Unlike earlier occasions when differences between the elected administrations and the Supreme Leader had led to disputes over competence and jurisdiction, the conservative administration of Ebrahim Raisi was loyal to the Supreme Leader and had no intention of using the screening of World Cup matches as an opportunity to challenge his authority. It is not surprising, then, that the Ministry of Culture’s Supervision and Evaluation Office stepped in, circulating a directive to provinces that permission for football screenings would be forthcoming as long as the screenings—inside theaters and elsewhere—used the feed provided by the Iranian Public Broadcaster. What delayed the process this time was that the police and the Ministry of Culture were reacting to two different crises: the police had concerns about enforcing public order in the immediate aftermath of the protests, while the Ministry of Culture had concerns about their cash-strapped cinemas.

At the end of the day, the directive of the ministry arrived too late for the screening of Iran’s first two matches (against England and Wales). Yet, Iran’s third and last match (against the USA) was live screened, to mixed gender audiences in 103 cinemas across the country, and netted 609 million tomans, considerably more than some movies could generate. With Iran eliminated from the competition, interest in the World Cup waned. Nevertheless, screenings resumed during the final stage of the World Cup. Overall, the total revenue from the screened matches was a little less than one billion—“a disappointing figure,” according to some cinema managers, given the hopes that they had to compensate for the economic crisis.

The delays in decision-making had a cost. In the midst of the extraordinary protest waves that shook the country, the usual suspects were once more unprepared, caught by surprise, unable to depart from the messy script they enact every few years.

**Politics in Fluid Terrain**

The state that emerges out of this account is composed of a multiplicity of state-actors that perform various functions, respond to distinct sets of interests, and are accountable to different entities. The police and the Ministry of Culture, for example, have different responsibilities and perform different functions: the ministry is in charge of regulating the content of what is shown inside a movie theater, and the police is responsible for establishing and maintaining security and order in the cinema space. Thus, their co-presence in the same spaces—the movie theater in this case—leads to frictions, and requires complex negotiations and the formation of some common ground to avert conflict.

Societal and other nonstate actors are similarly fragmented. Different actors within the cinema community—namely, cinema owners and movie producers—are situated differently vis-à-vis the state. They represent different sets of interests, have different, sometimes-contradictory, definitions of and expectations for cinema space, and therefore make different kinds of claims on the state.
To complicate things further, the boundaries between the interests of state and nonstate actors are blurred, breaking down notions of the duality of state and civil society as two distinct and opposing entities. Once freed from this binary, all kinds of new and unexpected alliances between state and civil society actors can be detected. As shown in this article, at one point, women’s interests became entangled with the financial interests of cinema owners that in turn converged with the political interests of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The merging of interests and newly formed alliances, however, are tentative and precarious. Cinema owners, as nonstate actors, join state actors such as the Ministry of Culture against the pressures exerted by movie producers, another nonstate actor, for the “football in cinema” project, but cinema owners and movie producers often come together against the state’s censorship of popular movies that could otherwise contribute to increased revenues at the box office. In fact, Ahmadinejad’s Ministry of Culture, an ardent promoter of the “football in cinema” project and women’s inclusion into football spaces, was most notorious for censoring and blocking the screening of several movies.

The screening of football matches has had a turbulent history, not unlike the turbulent politics of the Islamic Republic itself. Although the major controversy related to the spectatorship of the “beautiful game” has revolved around the issue of allowing, or not, women to watch live or screened games, the absence of women and their voices from the altercations between state and civil society actors is deafening. Women’s bodies and their cause have effectively been reduced to a pitch on which more “important” political and economic games are unfolding. Actors within the state and civil society have been realigning themselves at different times, using women and the spectatorship issue as blank banners for battles for distinct, unrelated trophies. The result has been an extremely unstable and uncertain terrain, marred by what I have termed elsewhere “messy governance,” lack of clarity in terms of institutional accountability, lost economic opportunities, and institutional incompetence and ineffectiveness.

Endnotes

1 For a full discussion about the role of different administrations, see: Nazanin Shahrokni, Women in Place: The Politics of Gender Segregation in Iran (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020).

2 See Paola Rivetti, Political Participation in Iran from Khatami to the Green Movement (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

3 Seyyed Hadi Monabbati, Deputy Director of the Arts and Cultural Organization of Tehran Municipality, reported, for example, that every four years, during the World Cup, cinemas suffered from a weak box office. See “Pakhshe bazihaie jahani dar do cinama [The Broadcasting of World Cup matches in two movie theaters],” June 1, 2010, Tabnak, www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/101949. All English translations of Farsi quotes were conducted by the author.

4 Donya-e Eqtesad, January 22, 2011, Item #640261.


10 “Momane’ate police az namayeshe football dar amakene omoomi, Voroode khanoomha mamnoo [The police prevents the screening of football in public places, women’s entrance prohibited],” BBC News Persian.
15 Iran, May 23, 2018.
21 “Modir amele yek pardise cinamayi: dar 40 sale gozashteh chenin bohrani ra dar cinama tajrobeh nakardim [A cineplex manager: In the past 40 years, we have not experienced such a crisis], Khabarban, May 15, 2023, https://36908082.khabarban.com.
24 For a great discussion on this point, see: Kimberly Morgan and Ann S. Orloff, eds. The Many Hands of the State: Theorizing Political Authority and Social Control (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
Political Polarization and Football in Turkey

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Introduction

Umberto Eco was one of the first intellectuals to problematize the attention devoted to football in modern times. For him, the sport represented apolitical morality, absence of purpose, and vanity.1 Similarly, Gramscian thinkers have claimed that the development of football served the commodification of everyday life through capitalism, appropriating cultural pursuits, distracting the proletariat with sporting “circuses” and obstructing their revolutionary potential, turning athletes into “robots” and spectators into disciplined, passive consumers, and creating further opportunities for capitalist exploitation and ruling-class domination.2 Football, in Gramsci’s view, was a prototype of an individualistic society as it demands enterprise, competition, and conflict.3 However, contrary to these expectations, the relationship between commodification and depoliticization has proven to be less mechanical or direct in recent decades. In other words, the commodification of the sport has not always ensured the depoliticization of fans and football stadiums.

Despite the expectation that the commodification of football would become a universal trend, fans have mobilized and engaged in public forms of dissent, even under authoritarian regimes. Perhaps the most famous example came during the Arab Spring, with the participation of Ultra fans from Al Ahly and Zamalek football teams changing the course of the uprisings against Hosni Mubarak in Egypt.4 Ultras shielded the protesters when Mubarak’s camel-riding thugs stormed Tahrir Square in February 2011, confronted the police, and helped the revolt to succeed.5

In Turkey, heightened polarization, democratic backsliding, competitive authoritarianism, and populism manifested themselves in football stadiums in the second decade of rule by the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, or AKP). Football stadiums have turned into new sites of contestation between the dominant political ideologies of the country: secularism, conservatism, and nationalism. In this context, on the one hand, politicians have increasingly leveraged football as a means to shore up and build political support. On the other hand, disenfranchised segments of society have responded to government policies by employing politically loaded symbols, banners, slogans, and chants in football stadiums. This essay first presents information about the history of the sport in Turkey and then goes on to discuss the relationship between football and politics at multiple levels (i.e., international, transnational, domestic, individual, and stadiums) and through different angles (i.e., soft power, political mobilization, investment, ethnic identity, gender, spectatorship, and performativity of slogans, chants, and banners).

Background of Football in Turkey

Turkey, with its population approaching 90 million, has always been passionate about football, the most popular sport in the country.6 It was brought to the Ottoman Empire in the 1870s by British merchants in the port cities of Thessaloniki, Izmir, and Istanbul. Those merchants sowed the seeds of what became “the big three” football clubs,7 or Üç Büyükler: Beşiktaş J.K., Fenerbahçe S.K., and Galatasaray S.K.8 During the 1950s, the sport went through a process of professionalization, first with the creation of a football league made up of teams in the three major cities (Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir) in 1952, and then with the creation of the national league (Milli Lig) in 1959. This was driven in part by the successes of the national team, which qualified for two consecutive FIFA World Cups (1950 and 1954). However, the national team’s story for the next four decades was one of failure and near misses. Only after Galatasaray’s golden years (1999–2000), when the team won the UEFA Cup and the Super Cup,
Football began to be commodified across the world in the 1970s. It became a multifaceted show business where fans were also customers buying a wide range of player and spectator products and associating love for their teams with the consumption of these products. Although commodification, coupled with increased visibility, allowed football to reach larger audiences, it also adversely affected the nature of fandom. Supporters’ strong identification with local clubs was transformed into detached and consumption-orientated identification of the onlooker. This new model of fandom also included those who had often never cared about football until they discovered competitive football games on their cable channels.

The process of commodification did not necessarily result in less state influence over the sport in Turkey. On the contrary, the state became the principal investor over time by creating municipal teams, providing extensive sponsorship funds, forgiving clubs’ tax debts, and building stadiums. In particular, the bulk of the sector’s financial resources comes from “iddaa,” a state-owned sports betting company. Some analysts claimed that this helped structure a web of patron-client relationships between club officials and the state, and motivated political quietism in football stadiums. In fear of losing state support, club managers preferred to stay out of politics, and opposed the politicization of football stadiums by the fans. Additionally, clubs’ skyrocketing debts and the decreasing number of spectators due to the erosion of competition contributed to a dependence on state funds. Turkey is the only country today where club debts and liabilities are bigger than club assets. Finally, for several years following the 1980 coup, the military’s suppression of political expressions of all sorts facilitated the depoliticization of football stadiums.

Against this historical background, I argue that the depoliticization of football began to fail in the second decade of the Justice and Development Party rule (2012–2022). I refer to two interrelated processes regarding the politicization of football: fans increasingly attempting to raise public consciousness of certain sociopolitical issues through their songs, chants, signs, and other displays; and politicians increasingly seeing the sport as essential to acquiring and maintaining power and trying to shape and control it. The latter process was perhaps more common throughout the history of the sport in the country albeit to varying degrees. However, the former is mostly unique to the second decade of the AKP rule. In the following section, I focus on these two parallel processes and explain how the issues and conflicts characterizing Turkish politics were mirrored in the sport in light of the empirical data elicited through excerpts from mainstream national newspapers and policy documents.

**Football and Politics under the AKP Rule**

Since it came to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party government has bestowed Turkish football with unprecedented resources: it has helped to increase revenues, embarked on at least 30 new stadium construction projects across 27 cities, built a training complex for the national team, and placed bids to host international tournaments. President Erdoğan, as an ex-semiprofessional football player, believes in the soft power of the sport. He regularly draws on sports analogies and wears the scarves of local teams during his political campaigning tours to tap into football’s semiotic power. Moreover, he forges formal and informal structures and relationships of patronage to cement his control over the sport. For instance, Yıldırım Demirören, son of the owner of Turkey’s biggest media empire and holder of a $675 million low-interest loan secured from a state bank, despite his bad track record as president of Beşiktaş, became president of the Turkish Football Federation with Erdoğan’s backing. Demirören returned the favor by throwing his support behind Erdoğan during the 2017 referendum in which people voted on whether
to approve 18 proposed amendments to the constitution, the most important of which was the proposal to replace the existing parliamentary system of government with a presidential one.24

Disturbed by some fan groups of the “big three,” Erdoğan also explicitly showed his support for the team of the conservative, pro-government Istanbul district Başakşehir. The team made it to the top-flight of the Turkish football league system (Süper Lig) in 2016, and won the title in the 2019–2020 season. The club’s president, Gökşel Gümüşdağ, is a relative of the first lady Emine Erdoğan and resigned from his position as vice president of the Turkish Football Federation in the aftermath of the match-fixing scandal in 2011.25 President Erdoğan’s favoritism expectedly angered the fans of other teams, the big three in particular. When Galatasaray beat Başakşehir 2–0 in 2018, a chant of “We are Mustafa Kemal’s soldiers,” a secularist reference to the founder and first president of the Turkish republic, echoed among the fans.26 At the opening ceremony of Galatasaray’s new stadium in 2011, Galatasaray fans had also booed Erdoğan and chanted, “We will not surrender, we will not be silent, nobody is a king or sultan” in response to the president’s growing authoritarianism.27

Football turned into a form of public dissent and a vehicle for communicating discontent by the silenced masses in the country. Football stadiums allowed anti-government fans to disrupt authoritarian politics and make their voices heard, although to a limited extent. All of this helped generate another cleavage in Turkish football. For a long time, the major cleavage was regional as Anatolian teams tried to challenge the hegemony of the three Istanbul teams. However, as a result of Erdoğan’s growing authoritarianism and interference in the sport, a new cleavage emerged: teams with more government support and pro-government fan groups vs. teams with less government support and anti-government fan groups.

Anti-government tendencies of some fan groups first intensified during the Gezi Park protests in 2013.28 Protests against the urban development plan in Taksim Square’s Gezi Park quickly turned into widespread civil unrest against Erdoğan’s growing authoritarianism. Football stadiums became an unprecedented site of anti-government chants, such as “Everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance.”29 This triggered a backlash, and political authorities responded quickly. Thousands of fans were arrested under the accusation of “terrorism” and 35 people, mostly Beşiktaş fans, were charged with attempting to stage a military coup.30 In 2014, a controversial electronic identity card system was introduced to monitor political chanting and banners in stadiums.31

Mirroring the increased political polarization, pro-government banners were also displayed in football stadiums. When Başakşehir beat Club Brugge 2–0 in 2017, a fan group displayed a banner that read “Erdoğan is the Supreme Commander,” a title reserved by secularists to honor the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.32 Additionally, sometimes pro-government and nationalist tendencies were mixed in football stadiums. For instance, during a third-tier game between Sakaryaspor, a team from northwestern Turkey, and Amedspor, a team from the largest Kurdish-majority city of Diyarbakır, military operation images were displayed on the scoreboard.33 These images were reminiscent of the 2016 siege of Sur and the clashes between the Turkish army and Kurdish militants in Diyarbakır. Similarly, when Kasımpaşa, the team of Erdoğan’s conservative, pro-government hometown, played Ankaragücü, fans of the former team chanted, “Mansur Yavaş out, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in.”34 Mansur Yavaş, the mayor of Ankara, was watching the game from the stands. He was elected in the 2019 local election as the candidate of the Nation Alliance, an opposition alliance formed by the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the İYİ Party.

Football stadiums also provided a space to publicly continue ideological debates from other cultural spheres, such as music and art. For example, when the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor’s Office issued an order to arrest Gülşen, a Turkish singer-songwriter, for a joke she made about the religious Imam Hatip schools on August 25, 2022,35 Fenerbahçe fans sang her hit “Love at Home, Love
in the World.” The song was a reference to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s motto of “Peace at Home, Peace in the World.”

During a game with Demir Grup Sivasspor on August 30, 2022, Beşiktaş fans protested her arrest, chanting: “Turkey is secular and will remain secular.”

Fans are increasingly becoming aware of the strong linkages between politics and football, and strategically leverage them not only at the domestic level but also at the transnational and international levels. For instance, Fenerbahçe fans chanted the name of Russian President Vladimir Putin during a Champions League qualifier game against Ukraine’s Dynamo Kyiv in July 2022 after a Kyiv player scored a goal. As a result, the team was hit with a fine and partial stadium closure. Nevertheless, the incident demonstrated how easily fans could adapt their chants to international political developments to provoke their opponents. Illustrating the transnational political dimensions of football, during a game in October 2019, several fans of Tractor Sazi, an Iranian football club based in the Azeri Turkish-majority city of Tabriz in northwestern Iran, carried banners in support of Turkey’s military operations in northwest Syria. Following the event, the Islamic Republic’s security and intelligence authorities arrested seven spectators whose fandom, they claimed, took on ethnic and political overtones.

Finally, gender norms around football fandom have started to change in recent years, with the percentage of female spectators in Turkey increasing from 5 to 10 percent. The Turkish Football Federation and club managements introduced a new set of policies to diversify the sport’s fanbase by giving away free tickets to women and children, and setting up women-only spectator areas. These actions were not only driven by the Federation’s bid to reduce violence and swearing in football stadiums long dominated by male spectators, but also its desire to help cure the chronic decline in stadium attendance. Among these policies, the most interesting perhaps was to allow only women and children to attend the games of teams sanctioned for unruly behaviors of male spectators. When Fenerbahçe was ordered to play two home games behind closed doors in 2011, the club’s next home game was attended by more than 41,000 women and children, which was a historic day for Turkish football.

Conclusion

As Simon Kuper highlights, football is not just about football: it is also about money, power, control, politics, freedom, struggle, and passion. When controlled by an authoritarian regime, football might produce and reproduce nationalism, xenophobia, and authoritarian thinking, but not without any social backlash. In this context, this article discussed how the government’s interference and growing authoritarianism, perceived as unfair and tendentious to some, has prepared the ground for the politicization of the football industry in Turkey. This happened in the context of the universal trend of commodification, challenging some of the Marxist and Gramscian expectations. Even as politicians increasingly leverage the sport as a means to attain political support, football fans mobilize and engage in public forms of dissent by utilizing the semiotic power of symbols, banners, slogans, and chants.

In the shadow of these tensions, Turkish football continues to suffer a persistent decline. Turkish teams serve as a kind of retirement home for foreign star players at the end of their careers, and the quality of the Turkish game lags far behind the big European leagues. The golden age of Turkish football during the late 1990s and early 2000s now feels like a distant past. As the latest episode in this tragic downturn, the national team failed to qualify for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. The only ones who attended the tournament from Turkey were soldiers who helped maintain security. Looking into the future, the pro-government and anti-government fandom culture might weaken or come to an end with the fall or failure of authoritarian politics in the country. However, no matter what, football’s ability to reach, distract, and direct the masses will likely continue to make the game vulnerable to political influence and intervention.
Endnotes


7 Each Istanbul team has its own legacy. Galatasaray, the oldest, is associated with the élite Ottoman-era Galatasaray High School. Fenerbahçe has the biggest budget and the most illustrious fan base. Beşiktaş is the underdog, the working-class team, known for its passionate fans.


12 See Mahmoud’s article in this volume for a similar trend in Egypt.


14 For more information on the state’s role in the soccer industry, see Cem Tinaz, “Turkish Sports: Lost in Politics?” in *Sport, Politics, and Society in the Middle East*, ed. Danyel Reiche and Tamir Sorek (Boston: American Academic Press, 2019), 123–145.


19 A third process could be how club administrators use the sport to further their political interests which falls outside the scope of this short article.

20 As Yıldırım writes: “one of the earliest clubs in Turkey, Altınordu Kulübü, served as the bright symbol of Turkish nationalism of the Young Turk government of the Union and Progress, starting in 1914. The wildly successful run of the club in this time period goes hand in hand with the Union and Progress’ endorsement of the club as a ‘state club.’” In this transitional phase from the Ottoman Empire and Ottomanism to Turkish nationalism and a new Turkish nation-state, Altınordu proved a useful tool of ideological propaganda. Similarly, Günes Kulübü became a symbol of Atatürk’s “Nationalism and Progress” and its endorsement of the club as a ‘state club.’


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26 As Yıldırım writes: “one of the earliest clubs in Turkey, Altınordu Kulübü, served as the bright symbol of Turkish nationalism of the Young Turk government of the Union and Progress, starting in 1914. The wildly successful run of the club in this time period goes hand in hand with the Union and Progress’ endorsement of the club as a ‘state club.’” In this transitional phase from the Ottoman Empire and Ottomanism to Turkish nationalism and a new Turkish nation-state, Altınordu proved a useful tool of ideological propaganda. Similarly, Günes Kulübü became a symbol of Atatürk’s newly-established Turkish Republic. The club would represent Ankara and its new symbol the Hittite Sun. The state support allowed the club to rise quickly in the Turkish soccer landscape, crowning its rise with a championship in the 1937–1938 season; this was a clear case of Kemalist involvement in the world of sports for ideological ends. Yıldırım, “Patronage and Industrial Football,” 7.

27 Yıldırım, “Patronage and Industrial Football.”


“Mansur Yavaş, ‘Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’ tezahüratına böyle tepki verdi” [This is how Mansur Yavaş reacted to the ‘Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’ cheer], Cumhuriyet, November 5, 2022, www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/spor/mansur-yavas-recep-tayyip-erdogan-tezahuratina-boyle-tepki-verdi-1999918.


See Shahrokni’s article in this volume for discussion of these issues in Iran.


Reclaim the Spectacle: Ultras Fandom and the Politics of the Sporting Event in Egypt

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The Ultras football fans in Cairo became a counter-hegemonic force to the Egyptian state through their participation in the spectacle of sport. This exuberant fandom constituted a vast social movement that operated across a historic period of upheaval (2007–2018), preceding the 2011 uprising and into the authoritarian rule of Al Sisi’s regime. The Ultras were a part of the street activism that ousted the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, and, although affiliated to different teams in the domestic league, they often joined forces in the battles against the corrupt rule of the National Democratic Party (NDP). The Port Said incident a year later, on February 1, 2012, saw 72 Al Ahly Ultras (UA07) die and hundreds injured in a violent attack at a football game in the port city. This tragic event projected the Ultras back onto the political stage, but this time as revolutionary martyrs. The motivation behind this orchestrated attack most likely came from within the military regime, in a reprisal for the role some Ultras played in the 2011 protests. This violence was likely strategically designed to intimidate the opposition at a time of transition as the military sought out ways to regain control, thereby reasserting vertical power relations in Egypt.

Although the Ultras phenomenon first emerged in Europe, it has become deep-rooted in the MENA region over the last decades. The first Ultras group to appear in Egypt was the UA07, founded in 2007 and affiliated with Egypt’s most successful club, Al Ahly S.C., which has a rich football heritage. This team dates back more than a century, having been established in 1907 during a period of anticolonial struggle against British rule. As in the case of other Arab countries, Egypt’s nationalists used football as part of their independence struggle and the Al Ahly club was founded by leading figures, such as Saad Zaghloul, to conceal their political activities in the conflict against colonial rule. The establishment of a domestic football league followed, and Al Ahly was the first club to allow Egyptians to become members. A century later, Egypt’s Ultras were formed in 2007 to emulate other existing fan associations, such as Morocco’s Green Boys Ultras affiliated to Casablanca’s Raja F.C, and the Ultras L’Emkachkhines of the Espérance Sportive de Tunis F.C. Like their other MENA counterparts, Cairo’s Ultras fused the contentious “hooligan mentality” of the Ultras with North African sensibilities to challenge political authority of Arab states through their own brand of football fan behavior. The Ultras of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Egypt have a subversive allure for the disaffected youth population of these regulated societies because they upheld raucous attitudes that are often anti-authoritarian in character and opposed to the commodification of sport. This fusion of male bravado, posturing, and antagonistic displays was an explosive combination within a tightly controlled police state like Egypt, and Cairo’s Ultras commanded the football terrace space through their visceral display of collective power. Mubarak’s regime perceived this brash youthful attitude as a threat to state power and, over time, members were arrested, harassed, and tortured in Egypt’s infamous incarceration system. Partially as a consequence of such oppression the appeal of the Ultras extended over the domestic football league as rival groups were formed in other cities to number a total of twelve Ultras groups associated with different teams across the nation.

The extraordinary political upheavals during 2011 challenged the Egyptian Ultras groups in new ways. Despite their history of conflict with the police state the Ultras publicly avoided direct political involvement and preferred a sport-based stance. When protesters first took to the streets in 2011, the main organizations, UA07, Ultras Devils, and Ultras White Knights (UWK), remained ambivalent towards joining the opposition movements in Cairo and elsewhere, reiterating the neutral
stance of football on social media platforms. Regardless of the widespread claims to the contrary, there is only circumstantial evidence to affirm their role in the political drama, from January 25 to February 11, that forced Mubarak to resign. However, individual members felt they had considerable reason to support the 2011 uprising and confront the state, because they were, like many, moved to participating in street activism. Therefore, protests included members of the Ultras movements and they were involved in the clashes with the police and security forces. The Ultras did defend the Tahrir Square camp from state violence and in November 2011 one well-known member, Karika, was shot by the police in clashes. This was proof of the Ultras’ involvement in the revolutionary politics of the time and forced the UA07 group to post condolences for Karika on the group’s Facebook page. As Mohamed, a former member, put it: “The bullet just went in the air and hit him. He died, passed away but it struck us too.”

The historical narrative of the Ultras changed at this point as they acted on long-held grievances akin to much of the youth population.

The unifying movement of 2011 was traumatically undermined in a catalogue of brutal attacks on street protesters by the military state, and political uncertainty followed. Such state repression targeted the Ultras groups, amongst others, and the death of Karika accelerated the conflict between the newfound political agency of this football subculture and the military regime that set about dismantling the spirit of activism in 2011. This was illustrated most vividly by the Port Said incident in 2012, when approximately one thousand Al Ahly fans travelled from Cairo to the coastal city of Port Said for a mid-week domestic league match against Al Masry F.C., the local team. This fixture was of no particular significance in football terms but there had been a history of antagonism between the fans built up over intercity rivalries, and Port Said’s Green Eagles Ultras had a reputation for violence. As the match concluded, Al Masry was rather uncharacteristically ahead 3:1 when the home crowd invaded the pitch for a second time, armed with various weapons, including knives and clubs. The ensuing violence resulted in the death of dozens of UA07 fans, shown live on TV to a shocked public audience. This violent rerouting of the football game from sporting fixture to murderous spectacle sought to refute the Ultras their political agency and highlight their notoriety on the national stage. This single traumatic attack had a devastating impact on UA07 group collectivity and reminded the wider public of the brutal potency of the military regime; a message broadcast on media channels in real time to a traumatized nation.

There was an initial emotional response to the violent incident across the nation but, ultimately, Port Said acted as a blockage to the Ultras movement thereby serving the interests of the political hegemony. The criminal investigative process was flawed, with only four full-body autopsies performed and little forensic evidence gathered on site, which hindered the legal proceedings in court cases that followed.

Cairo’s Ultras believe that the murderous attack in Port Said was not a random tragedy but a reprisal that had been anticipated by many inside the domestic football community. The death of Karika in November 2011 had occurred during one of the most violent episodes that became known as the “battle of Mohamed Mahmoud;” when over fifty protesters were murdered in a five-day period. This street was a focal point as it was adorned with revolutionary murals and led into Tahrir Square’s protest camp. Also, these clashes occurred at a point when the activist opposition movements had lost coherence and the security apparatus sought to exert control over the fluid situation. The shooting of Karika radicalized the movement as the military escalated the violence against protesters, and the transition process into democratic politics was further stalled.

A league game was scheduled between Cairo’s Al Ahly and Ghazl Al Mahalla F.C. in the Nile delta in what the UA07 believe was a dress rehearsal for the Port Said attack. During the New Year’s Eve game, the local fans invaded the pitch and attempted to attack the Cairo fans in a tense atmosphere. Later, as the Al Ahly fans returned home they were shot at by police near the Presidential Palace in Cairo. Preceding the Port Said game there was a pattern of violence emerging in the domestic league. After the
Mahalla game, the situation compelled Al Ahly’s Ultras to seek a resolution with other fan groups; they met with their Cairo rivals, Zamalek’s Ultras White Knights (derby game was to follow in February 2012) and even Green Eagles Ultras (before Port Said), amongst others groups in Alexandria and Ismailia. However, with the exception of the UWK, these attempts at unifying Ultras in solidarity to decrease tensions was unsuccessful as old animosities prevailed ahead of the Port Said fixture. Ahmed, a former UA07 member comments that, “they [Green Eagles Ultras] wanted revenge, with the help of the police, and the army…they collaborated with them to get rid of Ultras Ahlawy because of the headache we caused them. They all conspired against us.”

Ominously, before the game in Port Said, Cairo’s Ultras were heavily controlled by police upon arriving in the city and were removed from trains before the main station. In the stadium, the atmosphere was aggressive and the Al Ahly players could not even warm up on the pitch because of the hostile home crowd. The ugly atmosphere was increased by the Al Masry fans taunting the Cairo fans with a banner reading “Death is Here” and warning them on Facebook to bring a Kafan (the Muslim white martyrdom sheet) with them to Port Said. Furthermore, despite the history of crowd violence at football games a new head of security was appointed in Port Said just days before the game, adding to the speculation that the violent attack was planned by the security apparatus. The ensuing violence at the end of the game was seen on TV and widely reported by media channels. The Al Ahly players had to escape quickly to the dressing room and the injured and dying fans were brought there for safety. As the morgues filled up with the bodies of the dead in Port Said, the injured UA07 fans were flown to hospitals in Cairo, while other survivors made their way back by train to the capital. Farid, a former member who was seriously injured, described the dejected mood:

After we landed at Almaza airport we met the military ruler [Al Sisi], who was then the Field Marshal, welcoming us. You planned this for us, then welcome us when we get back with chocolate and water with

the media here. No one had any energy to object to what was happening. We were all traumatized.6

Immediately following the Port Said incident, the domestic football league was suspended. Over the next years, only some African Championships and international fixtures permitted fans to attend stadium games under heavy police presence. Football games in Egypt were mostly played inside empty ghost stadia and this curtailment of fans blocked the Ultras groups from their aesthetic expressions in the grandeur of Cairo Stadium, with an official capacity of 75,000 but often holding 120,000 spectators in the past. Under emergency legislation, the main Ultras groups, UA07, Ultras Devils, and UWK, were classified as terrorist organizations by the Al Sisi regime in 2015 and were prohibited from gaining access to football matches. Cairo’s Ultras responded to the football ban by switching from football to other less high-profile team sports. These, however, had far smaller stadium spaces, and so the prohibition of football spectatorship fractured the sense of the Ultras community. Moreover, the heightened police harassment saw hundreds of members imprisoned on spurious charges. As a result of this state crackdown, the UA07 and UWK disbanded in 2018 with the symbolic burning of the Ultras banners, although some members dispute the credulity of the staged events. Nonetheless, the dissolution of the groups enabled some prison releases of members but the North African Ultra scene had lost its iconic groups, signalling the end of the Ultras era in Egyptian football culture.

This brief profile of the Ultras movement in Egypt outlines a political process that confronted power head on and paid a heavy price. In a society governed by autocratic rule and a chronic lack of socioeconomic mobility, the Ultras football fan movement embodied the radicality of horizontal social relations—albeit compromised by heteronormative gender structures but nonetheless subversive to the status quo. The dramatic deaths in Port Said can be seen as a single event amongst others that demonstrate the extreme manifestation of violent state power. Port Said was a public trauma designed to bring down to earth the emboldened Ultras youth and block other radical actors from assuming
meaningful political agency. The rather short-lived social emancipation of the 2011 uprising and the sense of hope it offered for a different future no longer exists. Military regime rule and emergency laws operate as a normal state of affairs, while an acquiescent media continues to censor and divert any public malcontent.

Over their short lifespan, the Ultras groups in Egypt attempted to emerge as political beings—self-aware and self-determined, mostly from working-class communities—to reinterpret what it means to be a football fan. The momentous political awakening of 2011 has faded from the event horizon but those experiences are retained as eidetic memories, abstracted but still real for many, including Cairo’s Ultras. By acting as though they were indeed equal to those above them, the Ultras’ activism disrupted the dominate social order itself. Despite the claustrophobic political atmosphere in contemporary Egypt, the sorry state of its football league, and the absence of the Ultras as an organized domestic force, some of the idealism is still visible as the movement lives on. One sign of hope occurred on the eleventh anniversary of the Port Said incident in February 2023 as the Al Ahly team played in the FIFA Club World Cup in Morocco. Over the course of four games, ending with a high-profile match against Real Madrid, Egyptian Ultras were visible in the stadium and displayed a large banner defiantly emblazed with the prescient words “Never Forget” in English. This slogan was utilized by UA07 in the aftermath of Port Said in 2012 through various materials, such as t-shirts, graffiti, and murals. However, these words can serve as a timely reminder to those quick to dispatch the potency of the Ultras phenomenon in Egypt to the historical past. On April 23, 2023, at an African Champions League quarter finals fixture between Al Ahly and Casablanca’s Rafa team, the security state reacted when football fans were attacked inside the stadium and suspected Ultras members arrested. As the Al Sisi regime flounders under economic uncertainty and widespread public discord it remains determined to repress the Ultras phenomenon and control football culture in Egypt.

Endnotes

1 Interview with author, Cairo, 2023. Credit to Abdullah Nasaf for translation work on the interviews.
3 Interview with author, Cairo, 2023. Credit to Abdullah Nasaf for translation work on the interviews.
4 A conference held at Cairo University in 2012 examined the management of football fans at matches and the overall mismanagement of the domestic league at the time; Ultras groups were excluded from the event. Sherif Tarek, “Ahly Ultras Show Patience in Quest for Justice, but for How Long?” *Ahram Online*, February 19, 2012, https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/34857/Egypt/Politics-/Ahly-Ultras-show-patience-in-quest-for-justice,-bu.aspx.
5 Interview with author, Cairo, 2023. Credit to Abdullah Nasaf for translation work on the interviews.
6 Farid interview with author, Cairo, 2023. Credit to Abdullah Nasaf for translation work on the interviews.
Private Investment in Egyptian Football Clubs:  
A Case Study of Ghazl El-Mahalla FC’s Failed IPO

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Introduction

In 2017, Egypt passed a long-awaited “unified sports law,” providing a regulatory framework to pave the way for private investment in the sports industry. Egyptian football market value has historically suffered from a lack of private investment, and the country has been struggling to stimulate ventures across the private sector, especially in sports. Public officials, parliament members, club presidents, and financial analysts have been calling for reforms to address the unfulfilled potential in job creation and value to the economy. Private investment in Egypt has become necessary in an environment of increased austerity measures and as the government spends less on football and sports in general.

Following the 2017 sports law reform, Ghazl El-Mahalla, a historic public sector company, attempted to list shares of its football club on the Egyptian Stock Exchange (EGX) through an initial public offering (IPO) of $8.6 million USD in 2022. This was significant as the Arab World’s first football club public listing. The Ghazl El-Mahalla FC IPO was touted as a trailblazing milestone for a new era in the Egyptian football economy; public officials were optimistic about its success, and predicted that it would be the first of many IPOs for football clubs in Egypt. In 2021, there was an announcement that Al Ahly—Egypt’s top club and winner of the Confederation of African Football (CAF)’s Africa’s Club of the Century—would also list a 49 percent stake on the Egyptian Stock Exchange. However, this news was never followed with an actual plan; there were media reports on conflicting responsibilities between Al Ahly’s board of directors and its related football company created to carry out the IPO. Despite the hype generated by the Ghazl El-Mahalla FC IPO, the club was unable to attract investors and the IPO was aborted in August of 2022 due to lack of demand. The failure of the IPO came as a surprise to analysts, as Ghazl El-Mahalla FC was touted as the first of a long-awaited list of government IPOs for public sector companies, and it was expected that the club’s fan base, while smaller than the top-tier Egyptian clubs, would buy shares in Ghazl El-Mahalla FC even in dire economic and market conditions.

This article argues that the failed IPO of Ghazl El-Mahalla FC is as an indicator of broader problems surrounding private investments in Egyptian football. The study explores the underlying reasons for the lack of investor interest in the Egyptian football industry and examines the barriers hindering Egyptian football clubs from utilizing the new 2017 regulatory framework restructuring in Egypt. The study considers the relevance of ownership structures and investment trends in Egyptian football, and concludes with a call for further research on financial regulations governing the football industry.

The Structure of Egyptian Football Club Ownership

Historically, Egyptian football clubs were set up as private institutions, but were incorporated into the state during the nationalization era after 1952. Since then, the state has maintained ownership of football clubs but granted some form of autonomy through board of director elections and general assemblies. In its current state, Egyptian football club ownership takes three forms: 1) Quasi public; 2) state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or corporates; and 3) private company ownership, with the first two forms being the most predominant in Egypt. The quasi-public structure means that Egypt’s Ministry of Sports has authority over clubs. While such clubs are free to elect their own board of directors, their assets are government owned in most cases. These clubs are colloquially referred to as “social” and “popular” by Egypt’s Ministry of Sports, and include the most famous teams such as Al Ahly SC and...
Zamalek SC. The second type of football club ownership are teams that fall under state-owned enterprises (SOEs) or corporates, including Ghazl El-Mahalla FC and the National Bank of Egypt FC. Finally, the third type of football club ownership is through private investment, which was instituted by the new 2017 law to allow private investors to buy stakes in state-owned clubs. Before 2017, private investors could either establish a completely new club or buy a privately owned small-scale club with no fan base, like Pyramids FC, and inject funds into it.

Opening the Egyptian sports market, and especially the football market, for private investments has become a target for economic reform in Egypt over the past few years. The 2017 reforms were meant to allow popular clubs like Al Ahly and Zamalek to create professional football “management companies” to work around the fact that these clubs are essentially state-owned. These football management companies act as legal entities responsible for running the business of the club, with a possible 49 percent maximum private investment—the controlling 51 percent stake remains with the state. The privatization law was expected to permit top football clubs to attract investment but at the same time not to give away the state’s ownership of the club itself. While this regulation is also present in Germany, which is often used as the role model for fan engagement and governance, the difference is that German clubs are owned primarily by member associations and are not under the authority of any state ministry.

In the Egyptian football market, the 2017 sports law presented an extra option for investors who could previously only invest in completely new private football clubs with no fan base. The 2017 law allowed investors to buy shares in football companies created by state-owned football clubs, ones with prestigious track records and large followings. The caveat is that private investors could only own a maximum 49 percent stake, meaning they had no control over how the business is run. In essence, the new sports law tried to open the door for private investment, but without giving investors the ability to control how these investments will be handled or monitored, a condition that faced expected criticism. Against this backdrop and the worsening economic conditions in 2022, the Egyptian government announced that it would kick off the long anticipated public IPO program with the public offering of Ghazl El-Mahalla FC, a spinoff football company carved out from the historic public business sector Misr Spinning & Weaving company.

Why Did Ghazl El-Mahalla FC’s IPO Fail?

Even though the Ghazl El-Mahalla IPO was given considerable official backing, spearheaded by Hisham Tawfik, the former Egyptian Minister of Public Business Sector, and was the first serious trial to make use of the new 2017 sports law to allow private investors to buy into historic football clubs, it failed after investors put in orders for just 18 percent of the shares offered.

There were issues specific to the Ghazl El-Mahalla FC club that led to the IPO failure. Ghazl El-Mahalla FC started as a club representing Misr Spinning & Weaving company back in 1936, a public sector company. Ghazl El-Mahalla FC company was established as a separate legal entity to run the business side of the club, and to allow the club to be offered in the IPO. The new entity was the first Egyptian football company established as per the new sports law in 2017. However, this was not attractive enough to potential investors as the newly established company had no financial statements prior to the IPO year. Also, the ownership structure of the Ghazl El-Mahalla FC company seemed unclear, as all land and sporting facilities, including its stadium, are provided by the historical public sector company “Misr Spinning & Weaving,” and the club was given a 20-year right-to-use agreement, with no indication of what happens after the agreement expires. Football experts were skeptical of how Ghazl El-Mahalla FC would attract football enthusiasts to invest, given that the club had only been recently promoted to the Egyptian Premier League and was often in the relegation zone. The club’s only League title was in the 1970s. Thus, Ghazl El-Mahalla FC had an added layer of challenges in creating revenue because a) it did not have the same fan base as the top clubs and hence was not expected to generate ticket sales; and b) it did not get the same share of revenue for media rights as the
top clubs. In the IPO announcement, Ghazl El-Mahalla FC presented an estimated business plan that would generate 21.5 percent yearly return. This was considered quite optimistic by critics since the club does not enjoy the same competitive financial advantages like Al Ahly FC, including the latter’s valuable media rights and its participation in African competitions. Also, at this exact time there was a rise in interest rates on bank deposits in Egypt to help curb inflation. This meant that some potential investors would have the choice of a 20 percent risk-free guaranteed annual return on bank deposits, or a 21.5 percent yearly potential on a new football club IPO, which would be considered more of a gamble. Some also argued that Ghazl El-Mahalla FC was considered a long-term investment, which the market might have not been ready for.

While Ghazl El-Mahalla FC had its own internal problems, the weak investor demand also reflects broader structural issues in the football market in Egypt. The current dilemma for the Egyptian football industry is that historic clubs are of a hybrid and complex structure, with simultaneous state ownership and an autonomous board of directors. Since the IPO announcement did not provide guidance on which revenue streams Ghazl El-Mahalla FC would have—including sponsorship deals, media rights, sale of players, etc.—the failure of the IPO is a sign that there is a need to re-evaluate the state’s role in club ownership if private investment is to be encouraged.

The weak investor demand in the IPO of Ghazl El-Mahalla FC was indicative of several underlying structural problems in the Egyptian economy. Some official announcements attributed the lack of investor demand to macroeconomic conditions and the downturn experienced by the Egyptian Stock Exchange (EGX), rather than to the specificities of the club or the football industry. They argued that those underlying conditions hindered investments in football in Egypt, not just for Ghazl El-Mahalla FC. Economists might have ample financial reasons to explain the lack of investor interest in Ghazl El-Mahalla FC, but sports experts and executives have expressed different opinions related to how professional football is structured, practiced, and regulated in Egypt. Football experts pointed out that, over the years, even top clubs like Al Ahly SC and Zamalek SC have reported losses exceeding 200 million Egyptian pounds. There are several reasons to explain why football clubs in Egypt are losing money, including the relatively low values for sponsorship and media rights and the absence of ticket sales revenue since 2012, when Egypt instituted a full ban on fan attendance of football matches after 72 football fans were killed in the city of Port Said in post-match violence. Since 2014, the ban has been partially lifted but with a maximum of 5,000–10,000 fans allowed to attend.

Further, football clubs in Egypt no longer sell their match tickets nor market their media rights, after two newly formed state-owned companies were initiated for these purposes. Fan attendance, which is at a maximum of 7,000 for the 2021–2022 season, was further reduced after the state-owned ticket distribution company increased ticket prices. Egyptian football clubs have suffered significant financial losses over the past ten years due to the absence of ticket sales, estimated by some experts to be two billion Egyptian pounds. The lack of profits meant that even football enthusiasts did not believe in the promise that Ghazl El-Mahalla FC would generate dividends.

Additionally, football experts point out the inability of Egyptian football clubs to diversify their revenue sources due to regulatory limitations. Most notably, various international clubs have started to capitalize on their fan bases around the world with the use of “fan tokens,” a form of crypto currencies issued by clubs to increase fan engagement and to offer them various advantages. Using these tokens, international clubs can ask fans to vote on friendly match schedules, kit designs, or other similar activities. These tokens have generated considerable revenues for major European clubs in the past couple of years, estimated to be 200 million Euros. However, Egyptian football clubs cannot pursue such opportunities as crypto currencies are outlawed in Egypt. Thus, problems internal to Ghazl El-Mahalla FC as well as those related to the broader debilitative structure of the Egyptian economy in general and the Egyptian football industry in specific all contributed to the failure of the Arab World’s first football club IPO.
Conclusion

This article aimed to provide explanations for the lack of investor interest in Egyptian football, using the example of Ghazl El-Mahalla FC’s failed IPO. The explanations provided indicate that the recent legal reform of Egypt’s sports law in 2017 does not stimulate investment in football, highlighting the importance of tackling other structural issues in Egyptian football. There is a general lack of revenue sources for football clubs in Egypt, and even the most popular clubs, like Al Ahly and Zamalek, are reporting budget deficits on a regular basis. Operating within a restrictive environment that deters private investment, football clubs in Egypt have limited leeway to grow their revenues. Additionally, private investors are crowded out with the establishment of state-owned companies that have exclusive rights to manage tickets and media rights. The ownership structure in the current legal framework is also a deterrent as investors are wary about not being allowed a majority stake in football club companies.

This study is an attempt to add to the much-needed literature on football finance in Egypt to stimulate other researchers to pursue filling this gap. Further analysis is recommended to identify alternative club ownership structures that would encourage private investment and preserve national brands prior to passing amendments to sports laws. There is also a need to evaluate necessary policy reforms allowing clubs to explore different revenue sources; namely, regulations on spectator attendance and fan engagement products like club tokens. Finally, there is a need to review limitations on Egyptian clubs’ abilities to market their own media rights to ensure a level playing field among all clubs in the Egyptian Premier League.

Endnotes

4 Al-Shuweikh, “Amending Egypt’s Sports Law.”
6 Elbahrawy, “Arab World’s First Football Team to Go Public Seeks $8.6 Million.”
9 Rashwan, “Why did the ‘Ghazl El-Mahalla’ IPO Fail?”
14 “Mystery Company Estadat Takes Over Presentation Sports.”
Sports spectatorship in the Middle East is among the most politicized in the world. Where arenas for political participation are few, football matches represent a rare alternative in which political messages can be publicly expressed. Moreover, in conservative religious societies, football represents a rare occasion, especially for youth, to break free from the disciplined power structures of daily life.¹ For some religious conservatives, however, when people go to have fun at the football stadium rather than the mosque to pray, this potentially threatens the moral order prescribed by religious authorities.² This is why a number of Islamic religious leaders in the Middle East have continued to denounce football.³

In 2011, the Arab Spring brought substantial changes to the region. The massive political energy of youth released during the uprisings forced political leaders to reconsider their relation to their young populations. This included some religious authorities softening their antifootball attitude.⁴ In parallel, in 2010, Qatar’s winning bid to host the FIFA World Cup encouraged some religious conservatives to adapt to football.⁵

In this study, I examine how four of the most influential Islamic lodestars in the region—two Islamic theocracies (Iran and Saudi Arabia) and two Islamic movements (the Muslim Brotherhood and Hezbollah)—relate to football. The cases are selected based on their leading roles within Shi’a and Sunni Islamic discourse and politics.⁶

I argue that a substantial change in the attitudes of many religious conservatives, amounting to a cultural revolution, has taken place in the region. Many previous claims regarding football—for instance, as a source of Western toxification of the Muslim community—have been revised. Instead, football has been appropriated, even Islamized, and adjusted to Islamic norms and values as a sport and spectator culture.⁷

**Saudi Arabia’s Cultural Revolution**

In the mid-2000s, as Saudi Arabia came under pressure from al-Qa’ida and associated violent jihadists, Wahhabi-Salafist religious leaders issued a series of antifootball fatwas (religious rulings).⁷ One much-quoted fatwa from 2005 prescribed how Saudi football should be played: matches should be without referees; the pitches should not have any lines drawn on them; and disputes should be adjudicated on the basis of shari’a.⁸ The rationale was that football was only permissible if played with rules different from those internationally standardized and accepted.⁹ While Saudi men started playing football in the 1930s, and a national league was established in 1957,¹⁰ Saudi football was never actually played in the way prescribed by the fatwas, revealing the separate worlds in which the Saudi clergy and youth lived. A 2012 report issued by the kingdom’s moral police noted that 59% of Saudi Arabia’s youth were engaged in “forbidden or reprehensible behavior.”¹¹ Football was not mentioned in the report. For many Saudi youth, football is a key source of joy, with a leading Saudi journalist noting in 2014 that “Here in Saudi Arabia there is nothing to do. No cinema, nothing. Only football.”¹²

Saudi Arabia has one of the youngest populations in the world, with 67% under 35 years old.¹³ Saudi youth go to football matches not only to experience passion and fun but also to express anger and frustration, which some Saudi scholars have described as “football fanaticism,”¹⁴ due to the violence and disturbances that regularly accompany football matches in the country.¹⁵ By the mid-2010s, Saudi football had evolved as an exceptional social arena for expressions of popular power. For example, following Saudi Arabia’s failure to qualify for the 2014 World Cup, the protests of football supporters forced the head of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, Prince Nawaf bin Faisal, to step down. Through free elections not seen elsewhere in
the country, the football federation subsequently elected a commoner, a former player, from outside the Saud dynasty. In another incident in 2012, a nephew of the king, Prince Faisal bin Turki, had to escape an angry crowd of football supporters of the club he owned during a match in Riyadh, forcing him out of the club. Saudi authorities, observing the unrest in the region at the time of the Arab Spring, feared the consequences of not giving in to fan power. “The Saudis are extremely worried. Soccer clubs rather than the mosque are likely to be the center of the revolution,” said Ali al-Ahmad, an expert on Saudi Arabia from the Gulf Institute in Washington.

For their part, Saudi women have used football as an arena to struggle for freedom and equality. Since formal education was established for girls in 1960, physical education, playing football, or watching games in stadiums had been banned. More recently, after 2011, a form of underground resistance developed, with young women organizing their own football league. Meanwhile, female Saudi spectators made headlines by going to neighboring countries to see the football they were denied at home.

When King Salman and his Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), came to power after the death of King Abdullah II in 2015, they embarked on dramatic reforms centered around alienated Saudi youth. MBS sensed that the gap between the norms and values of the kingdom’s young population and the ones enforced by the moral police was so large that it was politically threatening, and instigated a cultural revolution from above. Opposition to the changes, including from the traditional religious elite, was met with imprisonment and suppression. Sports were given an historic new role as both entertainment and education in the “Vision 2030” state policy, which notes that “Opportunities for sports have been limited. We will enable citizens to engage in a variety of sports and leisure pursuits.” The changes were unprecedented in the kingdom’s modern history. Women’s football, their physical education, and their ability to attend stadiums went from being abolished to being encouraged by Saudi authorities. The popularity of football peaked. By 2019, several clubs in the Saudi league had an average attendance of more than 20,000 per match.

Attendance further increased after the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, with Saudi Arabia sensationaly beating Argentina during one of the matches and with Cristiano Ronaldo, widely considered one of the greatest football players of all time, signing for the Riyadh club Al Nassr FC in December 2022. “Everything is changed now,” a Saudi football supporter told the author in Doha during the 2022 World Cup, adding: “The prince understands the youth.”

Saudi Arabia thus moved away from the Wahhabi-Salafism, that had constituted the religious legitimacy of the Saud dynasty, and closer to wasatism, mainstream Sunni Islam. Ironically, wasatism characterized the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which Saudi Arabia named a terrorist organization in 2015.

The Muslim Brotherhood and the Impact of Qatar

Historically, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), did not oppose football as a sports activity, regarding it as strengthening both the health and spirit of the practicing Muslim, and as a fertile ground for recruiting youth. By 1946, the MB scouts organized their own football league, running 99 clubs across Egypt. Football and other sports activities were in fact essential for the MB’s ability to recruit young men into the movement.

It was different, however, regarding football as a spectator sport. Gender mixing and spectators losing their self-control were resented by the MB. Under the Mubarak military dictatorship (1981–2011), the MB’s resentment further increased as the Egyptian government blatantly attached itself to the success of the country’s national football team, contributing to what Rommel refers to as the Egyptian “football bubble.” On important match days, TV broadcasted 24 hours a day, playing hyperbolic ultranationalist pop songs, “I Love you Egypt” and the like, amid TV series and movies hailing Egyptian football success, all topped by Mubarak calling the national team before the match to “raise their spirit.”

In 2011, the Ultras, who frequently engaged in violence against their opponents and the police, became the
unexpected bedfellows of the MB when they helped protect protestors in Tahrir Square. In an apparent revenge attack for their role in the revolution, 72 Ultras of the Cairo club Al Ahly were massacred by armed thugs during a football match in Port Said in 2012, while police stood by and did nothing. After the counterrevolution in 2013, the military regime declared MB and the Ultras alike to be terrorists. More than 60,000 people, mostly MB members but also some Ultras, were jailed. Some from the MB managed to escape, many finding refuge in Qatar.

The MB congratulated Qatar on how the 2022 World Cup had been used to “to confirm our Islamic identity and highlight our culture in which the dimension of our humanity, morality and value system has occupied the forefront, leading to the strengthening of Muslims’ confidence in themselves and their eternal civilization.” The Qatar World Cup “came to raise the morale of Muslims in all parts of the earth” and had been “a message of glory and pride for all Arabs and Muslims.” One interpretation of these statements is that it could be lip service to pay back the Brotherhood’s debt to Qatar, which had long supported the organization, had resisted pressure from Saudi Arabia to treat the MB as terrorists, and had opened its doors for them as they were fleeing persecution in Egypt after the military coup. Yet, the experience from the Egyptian revolution should not be underestimated. There was always tension within the Egyptian MB. The old conservative, more introverted wing, had developed their ideas in prisons and were suspicious of people from outside their movement. The other wing of younger activists, more sensitive to the grassroots and youth trends, would instinctively look for possibilities within football, ones that the older MB generation ignored. The crisis following the coup in Egypt and the 2022 World Cup ostensibly triggered substantive changes in the MB’s relationship to football.

Hezbollah’s Appropriation of Football

The only Islamist group to fully endorse football is Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi’a Islamic movement. Considered the most powerful armed nonstate group in the world, it has been designated as a terrorist organization by several countries, including the EU and the US. Yet, Hezbollah also has another face. The spiritual guide of Hezbollah, Muhammad Fadlallah, saw the organization as not only a tool of resistance but of social change, geared towards building institutions and helping people. In the suburbs of Beirut, once referred to as the Shi’a “misery-belt,” Hezbollah built hospitals, orphanages, schools, construction companies, and charities for the poor. Moreover, entrepreneurs supporting Hezbollah assisted in building the best training facilities in Lebanon for their football club, Al Ahed. Hezbollah used football to recruit and shape Lebanese youth in the Shi’a community, establishing 150 football schools all over Lebanon, with more than 10,000 participants. Muhammad Yassin, leader of Hezbollah’s Sports Unit, noted that the schools aimed “to create a new sports culture,” adding that “Young men involved in sports have a high physical fitness that qualifies them to further develop their military capabilities.”

In 2019, Al Ahed won the Asian Cup for club teams, the biggest success in the history of Lebanese football. As supporters from al-Dahiya, a Shi’a suburb of Beirut, celebrated the team on their return to Lebanon, they waved banners bearing the image of the Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah, as well as the legendary Al Ahed player, Qassam Shamkha, who was also an armed Hezbollah fighter killed in Syria in a 2016 military operation. Since Shamkha’s death, before the first match of the season, Al Ahed players go to his grave to commemorate him. Martyrdom and football have thus been blended into one. For Hezbollah, football is a cultural field that is shaped according to its own symbols and meaning.

While Hezbollah is different from the other cases discussed here, endorsing football from the outset, I would argue that this is related to the group’s experience of politicizing popular ritual. When poor rural Shi’a migrated to the city in the 1950s and 1960s, they found refuge in the Ashura ritual, memorializing the massacre of Imam Husayn, which occurred some 1,300 years ago. The ritual created a common identity and belonging for the uprooted migrants. Yet, for Hezbollah, Ashura was more than public
mourning, it was a vehicle for mobilization. Football was similar in the sense that it created belonging, purpose, and excitement, ready to be appropriated by Hezbollah. Those who could not be recruited through ordinary religious channels were reached through football. 

**Iran Changing Tactics**

Iran pursued a completely different path than its ally Hezbollah when it comes to football. After the Islamic revolution in 1979, the regime engaged in an antifootball campaign. This included discursive attacks, labeling the sport an “imperialist” and “a colonialist plot,” appropriating the football field of Tehran University to hold Friday prayers, and banning women from playing or attending football matches, among other restrictive measures. It took a decade for football matches to be broadcast on TV in the Islamic Republic, while the ban on women’s football activity was revoked in 2007, nearly 30 years after the revolution. Male football was never forbidden; revolutionary leaders realized that banning the game would be self-defeating and would antagonize the popular classes, upon whose support the regime depended. 

Ironically, the regime’s general antifootball stance turned the game into a symbol of people’s struggle against the government. After the national team returned from the 1998 World Cup, 100,000 Iranians celebrated the homecoming, among them 5,000 women who removed their headscarves in a blatant violation of the Islamist dress code. In 2001, when Iran failed to win an “easy” World Cup qualification game against Bahrain, riots broke out, lasting for four days. The protestors yelled “Death to the mullahs,” as they reportedly thought the national team had been ordered by the authorities to lose. Nearly two decades later, in 2019, Sahar Khodayari, a 29-year-old football fan, set herself on fire outside the Islamic Revolutionary Court, protesting the ban on female football spectators and becoming a global symbol for the fight against injustice.

Realizing the failure of their antifootball politics, the Iranian authorities have gradually changed course in recent years by infiltrating the game. The hard-line Islamic Revolution Guard (IRC) has reportedly taken control of the boards of Iran’s major clubs, and has also infiltrated their supporter groups. Allegations have been made that the IRC has instigated unrest in order to “other” spectators, thus reducing the political weight of expressions of discontent. Ahead of the World Cup in Qatar in 2022, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi invited the national team to take a photo with him in an attempt to de-link the players from the ongoing street protests, which were triggered by the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amina by Iran’s moral police. In protest, an activist in Tehran said “This is not my national team […] it is the mullahs’ team,” and many Iranians wore Amina’s name on their shirt. When Iran beat Wales during the tournament, however, Iranian spectators celebrated wildly, despite the earlier criticism of the team serving as regime pawns. When Iran lost to the USA and was sent out of the World Cup, many inside Iran celebrated the defeat in the streets, and one man was shot and killed by police for honking his car. When Iran won, it was the victory of the nation, but, when the team lost, it was the defeat of the state.

In Iran, as elsewhere in the Middle East, football as an emotional trigger converted people’s grievances into popular protests. Over the years, Iran’s religious-political leaders changed course regarding football, from ideological opposition to pragmatic adaptation. Even for the Islamic Republic, the antifootball campaign proved to be untenable.

**Conclusion**

Football has served as a site of tensions between the more conservative and practical politics in the Middle East. Throughout the various antifootball campaigns waged by some Islamic groups, there were always other Islamic scholars who regarded obstructing peoples’ access to football as a violation. The 2022 World Cup in Qatar reinforced the latter, demonstrating the benefits of being in a position to control and enforce moral norms within the football sphere, and, at the same time, exhibit public joy and pleasure within a Muslim framework. Today, the main forces of Islamism have largely adjusted to and increasingly endorsed the game.
Endnotes


4 Mason, "The 'Global Game' in the Middle East," 15.


7 Mason, "The 'Global Game' in the Middle East," 4.


14 M. Al-Slimani et al., "A Study for the Phenomenon of Sports Violence in Saudi Arabia" (Riyadh: Leadership Development Institution, 1999); R. Al-Sulami, "Sports Fanaticism and Effect of New Information Means" (paper presented at the University of Prince Naif for Security Sciences, 2014); Abdullah Alshehri, "The Effect of Increasing Awareness about the Use of Social Media on Sport Fanaticism for Saudi Soccer Fans" (PhD diss., Middle Tennessee State University, 2016).


16 Dorsey, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*.

17 Dorsey, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, 23.


27 Rommel, "Revelation, Play and Feeling," 83; Rommel, *Egypt's Football Revolution*.


37 Al-Dosari, "Football Hooliganism in Saudi Arabia."


40 See Shahrokni's article in this volume.

41 Mason, "The 'Global Game' in the Middle East," 14; Chehabi, "A Political History of Football in Iran," 90.

42 Bayat, *Life as Politics*.


50 Mason, “The ‘Global Game’ in the Middle East,” 16.

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The Role of Football in Preserving National Identity in the Arab World

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Introduction

Football is often politicized and used as a form of social or political movement, or even as an unconventional civil society actor, with some football clubs directly reflecting their fans’ local or national demands. This affiliation makes football far more than just a game; it is part of people’s daily lives and a space to express political, social, and cultural identities. In Morocco, popular football clubs played a significant historical role in national liberation movements, becoming the voice of people struggling against colonial rule. Similarly, in Palestine, football represents an important space to gain attention to the ongoing conflict.

Morocco’s football, since its foundation, was part of the independence movement, becoming a space for Moroccans to struggle against French occupation. In the Palestinian case, football became a space for displays of Palestinian identity, which occupiers attempt to control by dominating or restricting Palestinian football, its teams, and its players. This paper argues that football was used in both contexts as a tool to preserve national identity against occupiers, and as a means towards gaining independence.

The Historical Importance of Football Clubs in Morocco

Morocco was colonized by both Spain and France and was divided between them from 1912 until the country’s independence in March 1956. In 1912, the treaty of Fez claimed Morocco as a French protectorate administered by a French Resident-General, while its coast came under Spain’s administration. All sports entities, including the Moroccan Sports Union, were established and controlled by the French occupation. The one exception was FC Maghreb Al Aksa, created in 1919 in Tangier, which competed in the Spanish league and was led by a group of nationalists fighting Spanish occupation in the north of the country. It is considered the first fully Moroccan football team; even though it competed outside of Morocco, its players were Moroccans demanding liberation. In 1956, after Morocco gained independence, the club ceased to exist, having achieved its goal of national liberation.¹

The first Moroccan football club established in Morocco by Moroccans was Wydad Athletic Club (WAC), which started as a water polo club but then added a football branch in 1939. The club was operated by nationalists, including Mohamed Ben Galon.² With ten Moroccan players and only one European, WAC was the first club to have a majority of Moroccans on the team. WAC became one of the most important clubs in the liberation movement of Morocco, alongside Raja Club Athletic, the other historic club. Under occupation, it was not easy for Moroccans to gather in public places, and WAC football matches became a legal reason for people to gather. The assembled fans used the matches to express themselves and to chant anti-French political slogans. Wydad Athletic Club came to be known as Wydad El Umma, or national community, because it was, and still is, a place to unite Moroccans for national goals.³

Wydad’s success as a team became a growing problem for the colonizers because it kept winning titles, making it increasingly popular among Moroccans. When the team traveled to play in Algeria and distributed patriotic leaflets, the players were welcomed as representatives of Moroccans fighting for freedom. The French authorities, concerned by the popularity of these nationalist gatherings, positioned tanks and military personnel outside the stadiums to frighten fans, and, in a 1953 uprising, the French army shot, injured, and arrested several WAC players.⁴ Even though French occupiers failed to prove
WAC’s direct involvement in the liberation movement, the club was suspended for a year in 1944.5 WAC was not alone in the politicization of football in the country; many other clubs similarly supported the liberation movement and deliberately included “Morocco” in their names to reflect their national identity.

Importance of Palestinian Football

Football in Palestine was introduced before the occupation by missionary schools established throughout the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Official football clubs were introduced in 1908 by Rawdat al-Ma’aref and St. George’s School, with regional integration between Palestinian and Lebanese teams to help develop the sport in both countries. Football became popular in big cities like Jerusalem, Jaffa, and Haifa, with teams playing in the streets in worn-out clothes.6

In the 1920s, several football clubs were established in Palestine under British Mandate authority, including the Jerusalem Sports Club and those associated with the British police, air force, and army. Football quickly became the main sporting competition in the country.7 In 1948, following the Israeli occupation of Palestine, Jewish clubs playing in Europe came to Palestine to compete against Jewish clubs, raising Zionist flags.8

Starting in 1924, the leadership of the Maccabi athletic organization failed to gain international membership in the International Amateur Athletic Federation because it did not represent Arab, British, and Jewish athletes in Palestine. For membership, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) required that the state’s federation make the application. To join FIFA, the Jewish athletic organizations had to use the name of Palestine and were forced to form the Palestinian Football Association (PFA). In 1928, the inaugural meeting took place between fourteen Zionist representatives and only one Arab representative. FIFA admitted PFA in 1929, and, in the first few years, Arab teams participated in the competitions.9

Arab football clubs played an important role in the emerging struggle for Palestinian national identity. Arab clubs were only allowed to play in the second-tier league, which eventually pushed them to form a parallel association called the Arab Palestinian Sports Federation (APSF). From then on, Palestine had two parallel leagues, one for Jewish clubs, and the other for Arab clubs. This situation continued until 1948 and the War of Independence or Al Nakbah. After 1948, and the displacement of Palestinians, the Arab football league collapsed, and a new Palestinian football federation was formed in 1952. It was reconstituted ten years later as the Palestinian Football Association (PFA). FIFA gave the PFA provisional membership in 1995, and after the creation of the Palestinian Authority, the newly established PFA was accepted as a member in 1998.10

After being recognized by FIFA, Palestine’s national team played under the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) in friendly matches with Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. The team also played in the World Cup qualifiers in 2002. In the 2006 qualifiers, however, the Israeli government refused to issue exit visas or travel permits for half the team, an act that was repeated in 2007 and 2008, preventing them from playing fixtures and representing their country abroad. The denial of travel permits was only one of a range of systematic obstacles Israeli authorities instituted against the development of Palestinian football. The Israelis were concerned that a Palestinian national football team would become a global voice against their occupation. After another restriction in 2012, FIFA decided to intervene to solve the travel permit issue for the Palestinian national team.11

Israeli travel restrictions do not only affect Palestinian football abroad but also interrupt the domestic development of the game. Palestine has two parallel leagues, one in the West Bank and the other in Gaza, that cannot play against each other as a result of Israeli travel restrictions. These leagues suffer from further interruption as a result of Israeli violence, which put both the players and their fans in danger.12 In 2009, many particularly
deadly incidents occurred. In January, the Israeli military killed three players in Gaza, Ayman Alkurd, Shadi Sbakhe, and Wajeh Moshtaha. Two months later, 20-year-old Saji Darwish was shot by an Israeli sniper near Ramallah, then, in July, the national team player Mahmoud Sarsak was arrested and tortured for three years. After gaining his freedom, he faced major health problems that made it impossible for him to play football again. In 2014, Jawhar Nasser Jawhar and Adam Abd Al-Raouf Halabiya, two teenage players, were deliberately shot in the leg.13

Remarkably, in 2015 and 2019, the Palestinian national team participated in Asia Football Cup tournaments, which helped it pass the Israeli football team in the FIFA rankings.14 The Palestinian national team also succeeded in overcoming some of the Israeli restrictions by qualifying for the AFC Asian Cup 2023, their third qualification in a row. From failing to qualify because of travel restrictions in 2007 to qualifying without conceding a goal in three consecutive matches, the team defeated Mongolia, Yemen, and the Philippines.15

The Israeli authorities aimed to be the only representatives of Palestinian football, but they failed. Palestinians use football as a means of expressing their identity and claiming rights to their land. They have insisted on forming a football federation that competes internationally to raise the Palestinian flag and raise awareness about their long-lasting conflict. Even when Israeli restrictions stop them from playing, Palestinians use this as an opportunity to demonstrate this oppression to the world. In the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, Arab and, some, European fans waved the Palestinian flag and chanted for Palestine. The Palestinian flag has appeared in matches for many years, but not with the same visibility that occurred during the World Cup in Qatar, which was a result of the tournament being played in an Arab country.

Conclusion

Morocco strategically used football in the fight against French occupation. Since football was introduced by French colonists, nationalist movements used this very sport against their occupiers, forming nationalist-oriented football clubs and gathering in stadiums to demand freedom. In the Palestinian case, British and Zionist occupiers tried to control Palestinian football and to imbue the game with a Zionist identity, but Palestinians managed to create their own recognized football federation, to play football with Arab Palestinian identity, and overcome restrictions to play for their national team. To this day, Palestinians express their national identity through football.

Endnotes

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5 Al-Komari, “Clubs born from the womb of national resistance.”
7 See Rabaia’s essay in this collection.
8 Khalidi, “Sports and Aspirations.”
9 Khalidi, “Sports and Aspirations.”
11 Dart, “Palestinian Football and National Identity under Occupation.”
12 Dart, “Palestinian Football and National Identity under Occupation.”
14 Dart, “Palestinian Football and National Identity under Occupation.”
15 Baroud, “Palestinian Sporting Achievements are Political Acts.”
Beyond the Game: The Politics of Palestinian Football

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Football has deep roots in the Palestinian national movement. It was one of the early arenas in which to represent statehood, as well as an important vehicle to represent colonial, refugee, and diaspora issues. Since its establishment in 1995, the Palestinian Authority (PA) invested in football, regarding it as a resistance domain in which to highlight Israeli violations against Palestinian athletes. Since 1993, it has achieved several political goals such as international recognition by FIFA and home matches inside Palestine.

This article explores the political roles of football in the Palestinian context. It follows the transformation in these roles, based on the political dynamics and challenges facing the Palestinian national movement and the ongoing realities of Israeli occupation. Palestinian football offers a window into the structural and functional shifts in the Palestinian national movement and the Palestinian issue in general.

Football in the Contemporary History of Palestine

Football in Palestine has been an important arena in the Arab-Zionist conflict since its earliest days, with important implications for the development of the sport. During by the British mandate, the Zionist movement established and dominated the Palestinian Football Federation (PFA) in 1928. In the following year, FIFA accepted the membership of the PFA. The national football team of this federation participated in the World Cup tournaments of 1934 and 1938. This federation tried to represent the Jewish identity in Palestine, as it unified the differences between the Maccabi and Hapoel clubs under one “national” federation.¹

As a response to their exclusion from the PFA, Palestinians established their own federation, the General Palestinian Sport Association (GPSA), in 1931, but gained no international recognition. During the Great Revolt (1936–1939), the British authorities shut down several Palestinian football clubs, concerned that these entities could become platforms for political organization, and maintained selective acceptance for registering new clubs, refusing applications submitted by “extreme nationalists.”² Palestinian attempts to play in regional countries failed as well, due to FIFA restrictions. The GPSA was forced to freeze its activities, restructuring and renaming it “the Arab-Palestinian Sport Association” (APSA) in 1944.³ That same year, increased political tensions and growing violence, mainly in the coastal cities, led the Islamic Sport Club of Jaffa to establish El-Najada, as a Palestinian resistance militia, to help protect the city from Zionist military attacks.

The APSA started its official attempts to join FIFA in 1944. The Palestinians worked with other Arab countries to discredit the Jewish federation, and to urge recognition of the Palestinian federation. In 1946, the Syrian and Egyptian federations contacted FIFA to register the Palestinian federation, supported by an official request from the Palestinians, who cited Jewish immigration and the restrictive policies of the British mandate to justify the need for a new federation.⁴

Post 1948 Football: Identity and Resistance

The Nakbah, which created the state of Israel, destroyed many Palestinian political, social, and economic structures. Sport was no exception. Between 1949 and 1967, Gaza had the only active Palestinian sports arena in which to contribute to the redefinition of identity questions. Palestinian athletes were aware of the importance of sports in bolstering national identity, forming national football teams and participating in the available regional competitions, such as the Pan Arab Games (PAG) from the first edition in 1953 to the fourth edition in 1965.⁵ Haj Amin Al-Husaini and Yasser Arafat, the youth political leader at that time, attended the 1953 PAG in Egypt, with the Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser, when Palestine won the bronze medal.⁶
In 1962, Palestinian sport leaders reestablished the APSA football committee in Gaza. Supported by Egypt, the Palestinians activated communications to join the international federation and the International Olympic Committee. These attempts were fruitless in football, with international organizations arguing that Palestine was not recognized as a state by the United Nations. However, international basketball, ping-pong, and amateur athletic federations recognized Palestinian membership in the 1960s.

In 1969, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) created “the Supreme Council for Youth Welfare” (SCYW), which became an important player for displaying Palestinian resistance through sports. The SCYW had three major goals: more recognition from the international federation, more international presence, and more efforts to delegitimize Israeli sport.

Between 1971 and 1977, SCYW participated in more than 65 regional and international tournaments and meetings, with around 15 active federations. During each of these editions, the Palestinians struggled for international recognition. Moreover, between 1974 and 1976, the Palestinian and Arab football federations worked on dismissing Israel from the Asian Football Confederation (AFC), which the Congress of the AFC eventually did during its meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1976.

In addition, SCYW established local committees in countries hosting large numbers of Palestinian refugees, mainly Lebanon and Syria, to support establishing Palestinian clubs in the refugee camps. These clubs took the names of occupied Palestinian cities, such as Jericho, Haifa, Jaffa, Nablus, Tubas, and Jenin, the last of which became champion of the Palestinian league in Lebanon.

Through football and sport, SCYW reflected the goals of the PLO, keeping the memory of the Nakbah alive. With their various tournaments and competitions, the refugee camps became the hub of Palestinian football, and, especially in Lebanon, Palestinian football clubs became key institutions for qualifying and selecting new fighters in the revolution.

During the 1970s, Palestinian national football teams were formed in Lebanon and Syria, but competed only occasionally since the PFA was not recognized by FIFA. They participated in some friendly tournaments, such as the Palestine Cup (Iraq 1971, Libya 1973, Tunisia 1975), Palestine Cup of Youth (Morocco 1983, 1985, Iraq 1989), the friendly tournament of Syria (1970), and friendly matches against several Arab countries.

The political role of Palestinian sport in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) was intensified in the 1980s, and organized through two leagues, Rabitat al-Andiya, in the West Bank and Gaza, which were the legal representative bodies of football clubs in the OPT. These two leagues refused Israeli offers to join the Israeli sports collective institutions and worked intensively on representing Palestinian identity. The two leagues were keen on naming one champion for Palestine each year, after final qualification matches between the champions of Gaza and the West Bank. The two leagues worked on celebrating each national occasion with football matches between teams from Gaza and the West Bank, mostly played in Jerusalem.

The OPT clubs ran covert political awareness programs and became important institutions for social, cultural, and political mobilization. They also created a voluntary work program, which became one of the most important youth organizing hubs. It is thus no surprise that the youth arm of the Fatah movement, “Shabibah,” was launched by Rafah Services Center in 1982.

**Palestinian Football after Oslo: The Way to “Statehood”**

On October 8, 1993, a team formed from the stars of Palestinian football faced the French Veterans team in Jericho. Thousands of Palestinians attended to see their first “national team” after the Oslo Agreement (1993), and to watch French football stars such as Michel Platini. The Palestinian players raised their national flag, and wore the Kefiyah freely in a match on their land, for the first time since 1967.
This match was the start of a new phase for Palestinian football, reflecting the political and social struggle for independence and to emphasize statehood on the ground, with the PFA submitting its proposal to FIFA four times in the same month in October 1993. This attempt succeeded in achieving a temporary membership, in 1995, before getting full membership in the 51st FIFA Congress in June 1998. In 1999, FIFA President Joseph Sepp Blatter visited Palestine and met with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat. Blatter carried Palestinian demands—allowing freedom of movement and removing barriers to establishing sport infrastructure—to Israel and discussed these with the Israeli minister of regional cooperation, Shimon Peres, but with no results.

In the 2000s, the PFA and the PA continued to reject the Israeli sport washing attempts, and, in 2005, the PA announced that it would implement sanctions on five Palestinian players who participated in a Palestinian-Israeli joint team match against Barcelona in Camp Nou. This was part of the anti-normalization campaign in sport, which had been developed and intensified after the spark of the second Palestinian Intifada (2000), and the creation of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement in 2005.

The Palestinians, through football, brought the Palestinian-Chilean community closer to their homeland. Palestino, a Palestinian football club in Chile, became one of the most popular football clubs in Palestine, and more Palestinians from Chile contributed to their homeland politically, economically, and socially. In 2014, Palestino played in a new shirt, bearing a map of historical Palestine on the back. Jewish organizations complained to the Chilean football federation, which banned Palestino from wearing the shirt.

In November 2017, Palestinian football received political attention when the Palestinian national team topped its Israeli counterpart, for the first time ever, in the monthly FIFA global ranking. Palestine was ranked 82, while Israel was ranked 98. The Israeli media begrudged this Palestinian success, protesting to FIFA that some in the PFA were former prisoners of Israeli jails, or that they had Israeli citizenship.

The PFA and BDS urged FIFA to ban Israeli settlement clubs, and, in 2016, 66 EU parliamentarians signed a letter sent to the FIFA President to ban Israeli settlement clubs. Meanwhile, Netanyahu’s office pressured President Abbas, through the US, to drop the Palestinian proposal to sanction the settlement clubs, but the Palestinian president refused.

The PFA worked on tracking any Israeli sport activities in the OPT. In 2018, Netanyahu urged to move a friendly match between the Israeli national team and Argentina to Jerusalem. The PFA refused the match as it had to be played on occupied territories, which led to the match being cancelled. The president of the PFA Jibril Rjoob said: “The Israelis tried to use Messi and those stars from Argentina, and I would like to thank them and appreciate their decision, which I think was on the right track.”

Conclusion

Palestinian football is part of the sociopolitical structures in Palestine; it reflects the shifts and transformations in Palestinian politics under Israeli occupation. The post-1995 period witnessed continuous developments in the political role of football. The first was to get FIFA’s recognition and raise the national flag in Zurich, and play the national anthem in formal international tournaments, which had been achieved by 1998. The second was to break the Israeli colonial siege on Palestine, through football, by allowing international teams and delegations to visit Palestine, which happened after 2008. The third was to monitor and prosecute the Israeli violations against Palestinian sport.

Palestinian football got more attention within Palestinian politics since 2011, when the Palestinian leadership adopted a new strategy of diplomatic resistance through international organizations. Thus, Palestine hosted more international matches in the West Bank, received more delegations, and utilized its membership in the regional, continental, and international football organizations, mainly to monitor and prosecute the Israeli violations against the Palestinian football, since Palestine had achieved the first and the second goal.
Endnotes

1 Maccabi clubs represented the middle and working classes, which disagreed with many social programs, and refused the domination of Hestadroot (the Israeli Labor Union) on Israeli society; Hapoel clubs represented the labor social class, which was managed by Hestadroot. Haim Kaufman and Ilan Tamir, "The Establishment of the Eretz Israel Football Association," Israel Affairs 26, no. 4 (2020): 501–514.

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4 Issam Khalidi, 100 Years of Football in Palestine (Ramallah: Alshoroq, 2013), 68.

5 Khalidi, 100 Years of Football in Palestine.

6 Alkhalidi P. 161.


9 Rabaia, “Sport and Politics in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

10 After 1948, the PFA changed its name to the Israeli Football Federation, and the SCYM, after 1965, established the Palestinian Football federation.

11 Alkhalidi. P. 249-250.

12 Rabaia, “Sport and Politics in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”

13 Rabaia, “Sport and Politics in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.”


16 Alkhalidi. P. 265.


The Project on Middle East Political Science

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network that aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by Carnegie Corporation of New York. For more information, see http://www.pomeps.org.