

COMMENTARY

No.299

Wednesday, 19 August 2015

Israeli Soccer Violence Moves Racism up the Government's Agenda

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

A violent display of racism by extreme nationalist supporters of storied Israeli football club Beitar Jerusalem coupled with recent Ethiopian Israeli protests against discrimination and the government's handling of the capture of two Israelis by Hamas has moved racist attitudes towards dark-skinned Jews and Israeli Palestinian up the government's agenda.

Driving calls for the banning of La Familia, the racist anti-Arab, anti-Muslim fan group of Beitar is concern about damage the group did to Israel's image abroad rather than a worrisome trend in society at a time that Israel is anxious about the gathering momentum of calls to boycott, disinvest from and sanction the Jewish state for its policy towards the West Bank and Gaza.

Israeli foreign ministry officials charged that an incident in Belgium in which Beitar fans waved flags of the outlawed racist Kach party founded by assassinated Rabbi Meir Kahane and threw flares and smoke guns on to the pitch as well as a missile that hit a goalkeeper during their club's Europa League qualifier against Charleloi SC had damaged Israel's international image. La Familia hung the Kach flags next to the Israeli flag in the stadium. The Israeli fans were welcomed in the stadium by neo-Nazi supporters of Charleroi with swastikas and Palestinian flags.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu responded to the incident, saying that he had discussed possible legal action against La Familia, believed to have several thousand followers, with internal security minister Gilad Erdan. "We will not allow them to besmirch the club's entire fan base or harm the country's image," Netanyahu said.

In an editorial liberal newspaper Ha'aretz warned that "the problem is not Israel's image in the world, but the overt racism that is fuelled by exactly those same officials who are now condemning it. Netanyahu and (culture and sports minister Miri) Regev are preaching to others what they themselves do not practice. With their racist remarks ('The Arabs are flocking to the polling stations'), their conduct (threatening the funding of Arab cultural institutions) and their antidemocratic legislation – which is so typical of the government they head – they legitimize the phenomenon called Beitar Jerusalem," Ha'aretz said. The paper was referring to Netanyahu's fear-mongering during the May election in which he warned that strong Palestinian participation threatened the outcome of the vote.

Founded by the revanchist wing of the Zionist movement with strong links to the right-wing nationalist Jewish underground in pre-state Palestine, Beitar has long been a darling of the Israeli right that counted nationalist leaders, including Netanyahu, among its supporters.

The only club to have consistently refused to hire a Palestinian in a country in which Palestinians ranks among its top players, Beitar has maintained its racist stance despite repeatedly being penalized by the Israel Football Association (IFA).

The economy ministry's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, in a historic break with past IFA and government policy of only mildly chastising Beitar, summoned the club days before the Belgium incident to justify its racist hiring policies.

The move came weeks after the IFA had narrowly pre-empted adoption of a resolution put forward by the Palestine Football Association (PFA) to suspend Israel's membership in world soccer body FIFA in part because of its failure to crack down on racism in Israeli soccer. In a compromise, the PFA withdrew its demand in favour of the establishment of a FIFA committee that would monitor Israeli efforts to address Palestinian grievances.

"The more deeply one looks into the reasons and motives for Beitar's racist conduct, the more strongly the impression emerges that the problem stems from the forgiving attitude of the authorities around it – from the Israel Football Association to the league administration, all the way to ministerial level. These bodies, using various and sundry pretexts, lend a hand to the phenomenon and allow it to exist – whether by turning a blind eye to it or giving convoluted and evasive explanations," Ha'aretz said.

"The time has come to stop talking about image, 'education' or 'processes,' and start taking practical steps. Alongside harsh penalties for manifestations of racism, Beitar Jerusalem must be given a limited window of time during which it will be required to sign Arab players – even at the cost of a major confrontation with its fans. Instead of condemnation, the time has come to act," the paper said.

The focus on Beitar's racism further comes on the heels of protests in recent months by Ethiopian Israelis who first demonstrated against the beating up in April by police of an Israeli soldier of Ethiopian extraction and the subsequent closing of an investigation into the incident.

Ethiopian activists have since agreed to a request by the family of Avera Mengistu not to protest against the government's handling of his disappearance in Gaza some ten months ago. The government issued a gag order on reporting of the incident that was lifted earlier this month under pressure from the media and various politicians. As a result of the gag order, even members of Netanyahu's security cabinet and parliament's foreign affairs and security committee were kept in the dark

Similarly, Netanyahu did not visit the Ethiopian family until earlier this month and only after his hostages and missing persons coordinator, Col. (Res.) Lior Lotan, was forced to apologize for telling the family that their son's release would be delayed if they criticized the prime minister.

Col. Lotan also insisted that the family refrain from connecting the government's handling of their son's case to the Ethiopian protests against discrimination. "I'm going to tell you this in the toughest way possible: Whoever puts on Avera the story of what's between the Ethiopians and the State of Israel will leave him in Gaza for another year," Col. Lotan was heard saying on tape.

Mengistu was detained after he climbed over a fence to enter Gaza. Hamas said it had released him after questioning but was still holding an Israeli Bedouin who legally crossed into Gaza in April. Mengistu is still missing.

Israeli media charged that the government had kept Mengistu's disappearance secret because of his skin colour, noting that his family speaks poor Hebrew, lives in poverty, and does not have the wherewithal to stand up for their son's rights.

Some analysts argue that the government's handling of the case of Mengistu and the Bedouin, whose name has not been released, are not unique. Families of past Hamas prisoners and soldiers missing in action who are not of Ethiopian or Arab descent said they too had been humiliated and forcibly silenced by the government during their ordeal.

Nevertheless, the combustible mix of Israel's image being on the line as a result of the violence of Beitar fans as well as Palestinian soccer efforts to force changes in Israeli policy, the protests against discrimination against dark-skinned Israelis, and the disappearance of Israeli nationals in Gaza puts Israeli racism in the spotlight. Israel cannot afford to be seen to be ignoring a dark side of its society and culture.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/07/israeli-soccer-violence-moves-racism-up.html>

James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. Email: jmdorsey@questfze.com

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, **MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy**