

COMMENTARY

No.305

Thursday, 27 August 2015

Israel Struggles with Racist Underground

James M. Dorsey

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

Israel is struggling with how to deal with groups some of which are underground that are linked to a banned nationalist political party that has emerged at the core of recent racist, anti-Palestinian incidents and include a militant soccer fan group that was responsible for last month's violent clashes during a Europa League qualifier in Belgium between Israeli club Beitar Jerusalem and Charleloi SC.

Two government investigations of Beitar and La Familia, its notorious fan group that openly supports Kach, the banned party founded by Meir Kahane, an extremist rabbi who was assassinated in 1990, took on added significance after Israel's internal security service, Sherut Ha'Bitachon Ha'Klali or General Security Service (Shin Bet), this week said it had no grounds to ban another Kach support group, Lechava, as a terrorist organization.

Shin Beit's decision and the investigations have moved centre stage amid recent racist and discriminatory attacks such as the firebombing of a Palestinian home that killed an 18 month-old baby and critically wounded his parents and four year-old brother as well as the stabbing of participants in a gay parade by an ultra-religious repeat offender as well as allegations that Israel discriminates against its dark-skinned Jewish citizens, particularly those who trace their roots to the Horn of Africa.

Israel responded to the firebombing by authorizing Shin Bet to employ "special interrogation methods" in cases of Jewish perpetrators of political violence that until now were generally reserved for Palestinian detainees and by allowing Jewish suspects to be put into administrative detention without trial, another punitive measure that in the past was largely applied to Palestinians.

Israeli leaders have condemned the firebombing as an act of terrorism and are keen to stop elements of the underground from threatening the fabric of Israeli society by escalating Israeli-Palestinian tensions.

Israel also wants to ensure that racist incidents don't pour grist on the mill of the growing boycott, divestment and sanctions movement that seeks to isolate Israel internationally or revive efforts by the Palestine Football Association (PFA) to get world soccer body FIFA to suspend Israel's membership in part on the grounds of racism.

While FIFA, enmeshed in a major corruption scandal, has larger fish to fry, it agreed in May to establish a committee to monitor Israeli progress in addressing Palestinian concerns in exchange for the Palestine Football Association dropping its suspension demand. The committee is supposed to regularly report back to FIFA's executive committee.

Israel's success in defeating the PFA effort is instructive in judging its overall effort to combat racism as well as resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. When the chips were down, Israel proved that it could muster the political will to take steps it had earlier rejected on security grounds.

In talks with FIFA president Sepp Blatter in May, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu proposed giving Palestinian players special identity cards and placing special sports liaison officials at crossings between Palestinian areas and those under Israeli control to ease movement. He further suggested a special escort service between Gaza and the West Bank to allow players to cross between the two territories that are separated by Israeli territory.

A visit to Gaza by a West Bank team constitutes the first time Israel has allowed the passage for a competition match in 15 years. It appears to be an Israeli step towards implementation of Mr. Netanyahu's promises. A further indication will be whether the Gaza team, Al Shejaia, will be allowed to travel to the West Bank for the return Palestine Cup match on Sunday against Hebron's Al Ahli. The winner would play in the next Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Cup.

The Gaza match was originally scheduled for Monday but was postponed until Thursday because Israel had, according to the PFA, blocked Al Ahli's travel. Palestinian officials said that if Israel indeed followed through on Netanyahu's promises, it could lead to reunification of the Palestinian league.

While soccer racism was not raised by Batter at the time, the two Beitar and La Familia-related investigations could also be part of the Israeli effort. The investigations potentially suggest that Israel will seriously tackle racist soccer fans.

The IFA, the only Middle Eastern soccer association that at least nominally has an anti-racism project, has until now done little more than slapped Beitar's wrists for refusing to hire Palestinians who rank among Israel's top players or discipline its militant fan base.

La Familia regularly raises the Kach flag, most recently in the last month's incident in Belgium where it fluttered next to the Israeli flag. The incident sparked outrage in Israel because it tarnished the Jewish state's image. Kach was banned in 1994 after it endorsed the killing of 29 Palestinian worshippers in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron by a member of the Jewish Defence League, a Kach predecessor.

Earlier this week, Shin Bet arrested and put into administrative detention, Meir Ettinger, the 24 year-old grandson of Rabbi Kahane. Ettinger, believed to be a leader of a Kach-related radical settler youth underground, has denied allegations that he was responsible for the torching last month of the landmark Church of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes on the Sea of Galilee.

"The truth must be told — there is no terror organization, but there are a whole lot of Jews, a lot more than people think, whose value-system is completely different than that of the High Court or the Shin Bet, and who are not bound by the laws of the state, but by much more eternal laws, true laws," Ettinger wrote in a blog post days before his arrest.

In a manifesto in 2013, Ettinger declared that "the idea of the rebellion is very simple. Israel has many weak points, many issues which it handles by walking on eggshells so as to not attract attention. What we're going to do is simply fire up these powder kegs. The aim is to bring down the state, to bring down its structure and its ability to control, and to build a new system. To do it, we must act outside the rules of the state we seek to bring down... At the end of the day, the goal is to shake up the foundations of the state until we have a situation in which Jews must decide whether they are part of the revolution or part of the repression," Ettinger wrote.

Last month, two members of Lechava were sentenced to prison for torching a school operated by Hand in Hand, an organization that operates schools attended by both Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian students.

Israel has yet to make any arrests related to this week's firebombing of the Palestinian home. Ettinger's youth group, believed to be made up of adolescent offspring of Jewish settlers on the West Bank, is suspected of responsibility for the attack.

"Every society has its radical fringes. But today we need to ask ourselves: What is it in the public atmosphere that allows extremism and extremists to walk freely in broad daylight?" Israeli President Reuven Rivlin asked at a rally to denounce the firebombing.

Writing in Al-Monitor, Israeli journalist Shlomo Eldar noted that the attack had been “made possible by the ineptness of the Israeli law enforcement agencies in the (occupied) territories as well as the patent and outright discrimination against Palestinians in favour of the settlers.”

How the government handles not only of the underground but also other militant anti-Palestinian groups like Beitar Jerusalem’s La Familia will serve as an indication of whether the firebombing and the soccer brawl in Belgium constitute Israel’s wake-up call.

Note: This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced under arrangement. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2015/08/israel-struggles-with-racist-underground.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**