

COMMENTARY

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Israel and Palestine Play High Stakes Soccer

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Israel and Palestine are playing political soccer with Palestinian football as the ball. It is a match which Israel is unlikely to win and that could prove to produce a bruising loss.

The stakes for Israel are far higher than for Palestine. Israel is effectively on probation as it seeks to definitively defeat Palestinian efforts to persuade world soccer body FIFA to suspend Israeli membership as part of a broader Palestinian campaign to isolate the Jewish state in international organizations.

Israel narrowly evaded suspension in May as a result of an intensive lobby campaign that convinced the Palestinians to withdraw a resolution at a FIFA congress in May in exchange for Israeli concessions. FIFA agreed to appoint a commission that would oversee Israeli implementation of its promises to ease restrictions that inhibit the development of Palestinian soccer. The committee is supposed to regularly report back to FIFA's executive committee.

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.

Israel appeared to be standing by its promises when it last week for the first time in 15 years granted a West Bank team, Hebron's Al Ahli, passage to Gaza to play a Palestine Cup final against the strip's Al Shejaia.

Hopes that this signalled a new beginning were however dashed when the Palestine Football Association (PFA) cancelled the return match in Hebron that had been scheduled for last Sunday after Israel agreed to grant passage to 33 of the 37 players planning to travel from Gaza to Hebron. Israel demanded that the four remaining players present themselves to security authorities for questioning after which Israel would decide whether they would be allowed to travel.

The incident sparked a war of words with Israel and Palestine trading barbs in the wake of the match's cancellation. Each side accused the other of playing politics.

"As always the Israeli occupation wanted to spoil our happiness," said Abdel-Salam Haniyeh, a spokesman for the Palestinian Higher Council of Sport. Israel's Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories described the players' refusal to present themselves as "another cheap provocation" by PFA president Jibril Al-Rajoub, a former security official, prominent politician and potential presidential candidate.

Although there is little doubt that there is enough blame to go round, Israel's insistence on the questioning of the players is likely to be widely seen as Netanyahu backtracking on his promises.

A majority of FIFA members agree that Israel puts unreasonable obstacles in the path of Palestinian soccer, including restrictions on travel between the West Bank and Gaza as part of its sanctions against Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the territory, and on travel of Palestinian teams to third countries as well as visits by foreign squads to the West Bank.

The cancellation of the match moreover comes amid Israel's increasing isolation in seeking to pre-empt the conclusion of a controversial agreement with Iran that would end the nuclear crisis. Significant segments of Israeli and American Jewish society fear that Israel risks damaging its most important diplomatic and military relationship with the United States.

Israel's international isolation increased when Gulf States who eye the agreement with varying degrees of suspicion earlier this month declared their cautious support for the accord. The Gulf move left Israel alone in opposing the agreement at a time that its policies towards the West Bank and Gaza are encountering mounting international criticism and a series of racist and discriminatory attacks against Palestinians and pro-gay activists have sparked soul-searching in Israel itself.

Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog warned that "we can't turn away an outstretched hand of the United States president" who attempts "to add and strengthen the defence capabilities of Israel, as he has proven in an unprecedented way during his tenure." Herzog went on to say that "an argument like this you don't have out on the balcony with the eyes of the neighbours and the world on it."

For his part, Malcolm Hoenlein, the executive vice president of the Conference of Presidents of American Jewish Organizations, acknowledged “discomfort” among American Jews regarding Netanyahu’s aggressive campaign. “Israeli governments should not be telling American Jews what to do vis-à-vis their governments. And we shouldn’t be telling Israelis what they should do vis-à-vis their government,” Hoenlein said.

Concern about Netanyahu’s approach were reinforced when US President Barak Obama equated the main Israeli lobby in the United States, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), with lobbyists that 12 years ago dragged the US into a disastrous war in Iraq, the consequences of which still dominate global national security concerns. Obama also described Israeli efforts to persuade the US Congress to vote against the nuclear agreement as unprecedented intervention in US internal affairs.

While Obama did not mention AIPAC by name, he left little doubt who he was referring to. It was a rare frontal attack by a sitting US president on one of the most powerful lobbies in Washington that is waging a multi-million dollar no holds barred campaign against the nuclear agreement, a corner stone of US Middle East and foreign policy.

Living up to Netanyahu’s promises to ease restrictions on Palestinian soccer would have earned Israel brownie points. The problem for Netanyahu and Israel’s nationalist right-wing is that sticking to the prime minister’s promises would have constituted evidence that Israel whether governed by the right or the left is capable when pushed of mustering the political will to take steps it had earlier rejected on security grounds.

As a result, Israel’s backtracking on Netanyahu’s promises is likely to be seen by many in FIFA as one more example of Israeli intransigence. No doubt, Palestine is playing football with Palestinian soccer. Scoring political points proved to be more important than letting a soccer match proceed. Nevertheless, in the overall climate of mounting criticism of Israel, Palestine is likely to win its high stakes political match against Israel if Israel fails to wisen up and pick its battles more carefully.

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-and-palestine-play-high-stakes.html>

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