



COMMENTARY

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A Turkish Stadium Harbours a Stark Message for Multiculturalism

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A condemned Turkish stadium harbours a dark warning of the long-term consequences of ethnic cleansing or what Turks euphemistically call the population exchange almost a century ago when Turkey and Greece expelled their respective Greek and Turkish minorities.

It is a message that has not lost its urgency as Turkey fights multiple domestic and regional battles against the Kurds, the Islamic State (IS) and the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) domestic foes, IS engages in its own brutal variety of ethnic cleansing, and Saudi Arabia wages war against Shiite Muslims.

Writing on his blog, John Blasing recalls growing up in the shadow of Izmir's 125 year-old Alsancak Stadium, where he watched his first soccer match and that was hosted in 1959 Turkey's first ever premier league game.

"While it is still unclear if a mall will be actually built in the space vacated by the stadium, the story of the Alsancak Stadium also tells the story of the Turkish republic from 1923 up to today," Blasing noted.

Critics charge that this month's demolition of the stadium that was declared unsafe because it was not earthquake-resistant is part of a government policy to replace historic sites with gleaming shopping malls and other commercially lucrative projects as well as the AKP's targeting of Izmir, a stronghold of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP).

The government has yet to clarify what it intends to do with the land on which the stadium was built.

“This country’s renovations involve the destruction of monuments and buildings that are sold off by the hundreds,” said prominent Turkish sports journalist Bagis Erten.

Government plans in 2013 to demolish a historic park in the centre of Istanbul and replace it with an Ottoman-style mall sparked mass anti-government protests, the largest since the AKP came to office in 2003.

Ironically, the shoe was on the other foot when the AKP rose to power. Turkey at the time had just fought an uphill and ultimately unsuccessful battle to persuade Saudi Arabia not to destroy an Ottoman fortress in the holy city of Mecca.

Criticism of the destruction of the stadium comes as the AKP is looking at snap elections later this year after it failed in parliamentary elections in June to secure the majority it needed to form a government on its own and the subsequent breakdown of coalition talks with the CHP.

Izmir municipal and soccer officials as well as a France-based Turkish businessman said the earthquake concerns could have easily been resolved in an effort to salvage the historic stadium that is crucial to the economic viability and football standing of the city’s major clubs.

Izmir and the Alsancak Stadium played a key role in the introduction of soccer to Turkey more than a century ago at a time that Greeks, Italians, Armenians, Jews and Brits were allowed to form clubs while Sultan Abdulhamit II banned Turks from playing the game because it did not stroke with his notion of national values and pan-Islamism.

As a result, Alsancak’s history and ultimate demise is symbiotic of Turkey’s relationship to its religious and ethnic minorities. Alsancak was built as the stadium of Greek team Panionios, which relocated to the Athens and the New Smyrna Stadium – Smyrna is Izmir’s Greek name – after the Greeks were expelled in 1923. With the departure of the Greeks, the stadium reverted to Turkish ownership.

“When you uproot history, everything you plant in its place becomes rootless. When you reject your heritage once, then you no longer have to own up to anything. Today you can build a mall in the place of the Alsancak Stadium because you once made the Alsancak Stadium in the place of the Panionios Stadium... Because you have systematically confiscated the possessions of minorities since 1915, and called their new owners ‘legal owners,’ now every kind of attack is allowed,” said sports sociologist Daghan Iraq when condemnation of the stadium was first broached.

“If a country doesn’t respect its past—in this case the close relationship between Turks and non-Muslim minorities during the Ottoman years—in the present, then how could you expect any historical structure to have meaning? How can you stop the rampant thirst for money through construction projects—in the name of the AKP’s extreme capitalism—if you don’t care about history? The stadium wasn’t even owned by Turks before the population exchange of 1923, so now it can be taken from its new ‘owners and who knows what will be built in its place,” added Blasing.

Iraq and Blasing’s comments take on added importance with Western unease of Turkey’s concentration on fighting the insurgent Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rather than IS. The renewed hostilities and Turkey’s domestic political crisis have dashed hopes for an end to the 30-year long insurgency that has cost more than 40,000 lives.

They also bode ill as the Middle East’s Christian and non-Muslim communities are dwindling as a result of IS persecution, years of bloodshed and the region succumbs to politically motivated sectarianism.

Germany insisted that its decision to withdraw two batteries of Patriot missiles and 250 troops from Turkey was unrelated to criticism of the Turkish military operations against the Kurds. The German defence ministry said the withdrawal was because Turkey no longer confronted a serious threat of missile attack by Syria.

Besides fending off criticism of its confrontation with the Kurds, Turkey has also battled in the last year against a trend in the West to classify as genocide the 1915 massacre of Armenians in which some 1.5 million people are believed to have died.

The destruction of the stadium which was home to four of Izmir’s soccer clubs has introduced them to the Kafkaesque world of Turkish politics. The Turkish Football Federation rejected the clubs’ licensing applications and fined them because they lacked a stadium.

“Obviously, this is bizarre... But this is Turkey. The teams from Turkey’s oldest footballing city are being penalized for a governmental decision to destroy their stadium. But the absurdity doesn’t stop there. History is brutal...the wrongs only repeat themselves,” Blasing wrote.

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/a-turkish-stadium-harbours-stark.html>

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