

COMMENTARY

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Israel Suspends Israeli-Palestinian Encounters on the Pitch

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The Israel Football Association (IFA) acting on orders of the police has suspended what it calls ‘sensitive’ matches, a reference to professional and amateur games between Israeli Jewish and Israeli Palestinian squads.

Police said the suspension on soccer pitches that have long signalled mounting tensions, violence, and racism in Israeli society was because their forces were stretched to the limit in attempting to prevent Palestinian lone wolf attacks on Israeli Jews.

The police and Israeli military have been accused in recent weeks of using excessive force, including shoot-to-kill, in their effort to counter mushrooming peaceful and violent protests in against Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

Supporters of arch rivals Beitar Jerusalem, Israel’s most hard line anti-Palestinian club, and Bnei Sakhnin, the only Israeli Palestinian team in the premier league, hurled rocks at one another. Shots were fired when supporters of Maccabi Tel Aviv clashed with Palestinians who were celebrating the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha.

A militant support group, Maccabi Tel Aviv Fanatics, hoisted a banner during a match saying “Refugees Not Welcome,” after their club said it alongside some 80 teams competing in the Champions and Europa League would donate 1 euro per ticket to support Syrian refugees from their first home games. The banner was a play on banners saying “Refugees Welcome” that are frequently hoisted by fans in European stadia.

Two other recent incidents highlight the degree to which violence has become rooted in Israeli society as it is a tool in Palestinian resistance to Israeli rule among disenfranchised and disenfranchised West Bank youth.

“We are all human beings we are all equal. It does not matter if an Arab stabbed me or a Jew stabbed me, a religious, orthodox or secular person. I have no words to describe this hate crime,” Uzi Rezken, a supermarket employee, told Israeli television. Rezken was speaking from his hospital bed after having been stabbed by an Israeli Jew who mistook him for being a Palestinian.

“You deserve it, you deserve it. You are bastard Arabs,” Rezken quoted his attacker as saying as the supermarket employee shouted at him that he was Jewish, not Palestinian.

Days earlier, members of La Familia, Israel’s most violent, racist soccer fan group that supports Beitar Jerusalem, the only top Israeli club that refuses to hire Palestinian or Muslim players, attacked a supporter of rival club Hapoel Tel Aviv with an axe.

Members of La Familia wearing Beitar T-shirts, many of who openly support the outlawed racist Kach party, marched alongside supporters of Lechava, a right-wing grouping seeking to prevent the assimilation of non-Jews in Israel through Jerusalem shouting "Death to Arabs" and “Mohammed is dead,” slogans frequently heard on the stands during Beitar matches, and “may your village burn.” Palestinians account for about 20 percent of Israel’s citizenry.

The soccer violence with La Familia in the lead is likely to complicate Israeli efforts to ensure that world soccer body FIFA does not become the first international organization to suspend Israel. Israel evaded suspension last May when Palestine withdrew a resolution demanding that Israel be penalized for its policies, including racism in soccer. A FIFA committee is seeking to mediate an Israeli-Palestinian compromise that in the current environment is likely to prove increasingly difficult.

The Palestine Football Association (PFA) has been documenting alleged violations of Israeli promises to work with FIFA and the Palestinians to eliminate Israeli obstacles to the development and functioning of Palestinian. Among incidents cited is Israel’s reported refusal earlier this month to allow a player of the Palestinian national team to return to the West Bank from the squad’s qualifier in Qatar for a regional tournament when he arrived on an Israeli-controlled bridge linking the West Bank to Jordan.

The threat of a FIFA suspension weighs heavily with international public opinion increasingly critical of Israel and the Palestinians likely to step up their campaign to isolate Israel in international organizations.

Spanish football club Sevilla FC recently rejected a US\$ 5.7 million sponsorship deal to advertise tourism in Israel on its players’ shirts. The 2015 UEFA Europa League champions turned down the offer because it conjured support for Israel, Spanish sports newspaper Mundo Deportivo reported.

Israeli sports reporter Adi Rubinstein writing on his Facebook page noted that soccer pitches often serve as early indicators of societal trends. “What has been happening in Israel since ... (last month’s) beginning of (the Jewish calendar) year is more than anything else reminiscent of what happened in Yugoslavia in 1990s. That is precisely how it started (there) How did it end? Well, we all know,” he wrote referring to the Yugoslav wars.

Speaking to Al-Monitor, Guy Israel, a member of La Familia, which has several of its members behind bars and like Beitar Jerusalem faces several judicial and administrative investigations, appeared to be downplaying the political and racist nature of much of the group’s activity.

“It’s a matter of letting off steam. At present, there are restrictions on anything and everything. You mustn’t swear, and you shouldn’t smoke in the pub. There is a long list of bans and prohibitions. You are limited wherever you go. And the rage builds up inside you until it finally explodes,” Israel said.

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/2015/10/israel-suspends-israeli-palestinian.html>

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