

COMMENTARY

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Targeted Paris Stadium Symbolizes Pitfalls of War against the Islamic State

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Zouhair, a security guard of immigrant background, was one of several security officers, who prevented three of the Paris suicide bombers from entering the city's Stade de France stadium. The bombers were forced to blow themselves up outside the stadium and at nearby McDonald's.

Little is publicly known about the background of Zouhair who described to The Wall Street Journal what happened at the stadium where French President Francois Hollande was among 80,000 people watching a friendly between France and Germany.

What is clear however is that Zouhair represents a significant view among members of France's Muslim community, even if many migrants feel side lined, marginalized and hopeless in a country that has yet to come to grips with becoming an immigration society.

Like Ahmed Merabet, the police officer killed in Paris in January when two brothers attacked Charlie Hebdo, the satirical magazine that at times mocked his religion, Zouhair was standing guard for a symbol, the French national soccer team that disillusioned Muslim youth have come to reject as not representing them.

Instead, they often support the national teams of Algeria and Morocco and in some cases of other African states. Their rejection is akin to notions among militant soccer fans in Egypt who in the past refused to support their national team because it was ousted President Hosni Mubarak rather than Egypt's squad.

The juxtaposition of Zouhair, the security guard, and the three Muslim suicide bombers, suggests that the Stade de France was chosen as one of several targets for Friday's attacks not simply because of the large number of people present. The juxtaposition was further thrown into sharp relief with an announcement by French midfielder Lassana Diarra that his cousin had been killed in the IS attacks while he was playing in the stadium

The targeting of the stadium fit the goals of the Islamic State (IS), which has claimed responsibility for the attacks, of polarizing communities, exacerbating social tensions, and driving the marginalized further into the margins.

Stade de France is one of ten French stadia slated to host next year's Euro 2016, the first major international soccer tournament in France since the 1998 World Cup.

By focusing almost exclusively on stepped-up security and declaring war against the backdrop of mounting anti-Muslim sentiment in the wake of the Paris attacks on an Islamist group with which France and Europe were already at war for more than a year, European leaders risk becoming the Islamic State's unwitting helpers.

By failing to adopt social and economic policies at home that would undermine IS's attraction to disaffected youth who feel they have little to lose, they exasperate the very divide between Zouhair and the suicide bombers that has turned the French national soccer team, a reflection of France at both its best and its worst, into a divisive symbol.

Some analysts suggest that the Paris attacks may mark IS's beginning of the end with calls for a far more robust military confrontation of IS in Syria and Iraq. The problem is that the battlefield stretches far beyond IS's bases in the Middle East and would not be resolved by simply defeating the jihadist group.

The struggle against what IS represents needs to be waged as much in its Syrian capital of Raqqa as in the dismal banlieues or satellites of French cities that furnish the jihadists with the largest contingent of European foreign fighters; the populous neighbourhoods in Tunisia that account for the single largest group of foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq; in Saudi Arabia, whose citizens account for the second largest number of foreign fighters and whose decades-long effort to propagate a puritan, intolerant, interpretation of Islam has been a far more important breeding ground for jihadist thinking than the writings of militant Islamist thinkers like Sayyid Qutb; and in Western capitals led by Washington who view retrograde, repressive regimes like those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt as part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

The fallout of the failure of French governments to wage war on discrimination and marginalization at home as fervently as Hollande is likely to wage war against IS in the wake of the Paris attacks is reflected in the ups and downs of the French national team. When the team

made up of a majority of players with an immigrant Muslim background won the 1998 World Cup, it was feted as a model of successful French multiculturalism. The team's success was celebrated by Frenchmen irrespective of their cultural and ethnic background.

Little was left of that success little more than a decade later when the team became an embarrassment for France during the 2010 World Cup in South Africa. Its players revolted, refused to train, and ultimately were denounced as having shamed France at the very moment that their German soccer rivals captured the crown of successful European multiculturalism.

In the 12 years between victory and humiliation, France witnessed its worst race riots in the heavily Muslim populated banlieues of major cities. Zinedine Zidane, widely viewed as one of his generation's best players, was given the red card during the 2006 World Cup for head butting another player who had allegedly insulted the Prophet Mohammed. Last year's celebrations in France of Algeria's defeat of Russia in a 2018 World Cup qualifier sparked riots that prompted National Front leader Marine Le Pen to demand the reversal of a law that allows French citizens to have dual nationality.

"In this climate of terror, it is important for all of us who represent our country and its diversity to speak out and stay united in the face of a horror that has neither colour, nor religion. Let us together defend love, respect and peace," Diarra said. His appeal is as much incumbent on Muslim leaders as it is on Hollande and European leaders in an environment of mounting Islamophobia and anti-migrant and anti-foreigner sentiment.

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/2015/11/targeted-paris-stadium-symbolizes.html>

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