

# COMMENTARY

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## **Middle East Soccer:**

### **Trump's Israel-Palestine peacemaking put to the test**

**James M. Dorsey**

**Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

Israel and Palestine are gearing up for a crucial battle in world soccer body FIFA about the status of Israeli-occupied territory that is likely to foreshadow President Donald J. Trump's efforts to revive long-stalled Middle East peace efforts.

At stake in the battle that will play out during FIFA's annual congress in May in Bahrain is the status of six West Bank Israeli settlement teams that play in Israeli leagues. The Palestine Football Association (PFA) and human rights groups charge that the Israel Football Association's (IFA) policy violates FIFA rules as well as international law that sees Israeli settlements as illegal.

Israel has argued that Israeli occupied territory involves disputed lands whose future should be determined in peace negotiations.

Past efforts by the PFA to get Israel's FIFA membership suspended have stranded, prompting years of failed efforts by the world soccer body to negotiate a solution. FIFA negotiator Tokyo Sexwale, whose mandate ends in May, all but declared failure in a report submitted this week to the world body.

Sexwale proposed three options in a last-ditch effort, all of which are unlikely to provide relief, sources said Sexwale reportedly suggested that FIFA could take the legal risk of throwing in the towel, give Israel six months to rectify the status of the disputed clubs, or continue to attempt to achieve a negotiated solution.

Accepting the status quo would revive efforts by the PFA and human rights groups to lobby for a sufficient majority to suspend Israel's membership at the forthcoming congress. A suspension would complicate Trump's Middle East peace efforts.

It would put Arab states, particularly those in the Gulf, in a bind. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states have a vested interest in the Trump administration's tougher attitude towards Iran. Gulf-backed bi-partisan draft legislation that would tighten US sanctions against Iran is pending in the US Congress.

Gulf States as well as Egypt have backed Trump's peace-making efforts. Trump called during last month's visit to Washington by Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu for a halt to expansion of West Bank and Jerusalem settlements despite adopting an overall far more pro-Israeli attitude than past administrations. The president has also invited Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to visit Washington in the near future.

Egyptian security last month barred PFA president and Palestinian sports czar Jibril Rajoub entry to Egypt to attend a counter-terrorism conference. Rajoub, a close associate Abbas, is widely seen as a possible future Palestinian president.

The PFA and Human Rights Watch have argued that granting West Bank settlement teams the right to play in Israeli leagues violates United Nations Security Council resolutions, including last's December's condemnation of Israeli settlements, as well as the Fourth Geneva Convention that sets rules for administering occupied territory.

They also argue that tolerating the status quo would contradict FIFA's adoption of United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.

Finally, the PFA and Human Rights Watch note that FIFA statutes prohibit a member association from holding games on the territory of another member association without permission. FIFA's European affiliate, UEFA, blocked Russia from incorporating teams from occupied Crimea in its national league competitions on those grounds.

Giving Israel six months to rectify the situation could offer a temporary, face-saving compromise. By implication, it would acknowledge that allowing West Bank teams to play in Israeli leagues constitutes a violation.

While Israel is certain to reject the notion, it would buy it time at a moment that countering the growing Boycott, Diversification and Sanctions (BDS) movement that seeks to penalize Israel for continued occupation of the West Bank has become a priority. Israel recently emulated Trump's disputed ban on travel to the United States from six majority Muslim countries. It declared a ban on travel to Israel by BDS supporters.

It would also allow Arab and Gulf states to give Trump's peace-making efforts a chance. Suspension of Israel by FIFA would constitute a major Palestinian victory in long-standing efforts to isolate Israel in international organizations.

Buying into Sexwale's proposal for a six-month period is a risky undertaking for all. Rajoub was criticized for his dropping last year of a proposal to suspend Israel after he realized that he could not muster a quorum in the FIFA congress. Ultra-nationalists in Netanyahu's cabinet who advocate annexation of the West Bank would no doubt reject the compromise.

Extending negotiations essentially kicks the ball down the road at a time that Israel is emboldened by Trump's pro-Israeli and anti-Muslim stance while Palestinians are going through the motions with little confidence that peace-making will produce tangible results. There is little reason to assume that negotiations would succeed where they have failed without real progress in overall peace-making.

The world soccer body is, nonetheless, likely to opt for the road of least resistance, extending negotiations, despite growing criticism of Israel among FIFA members. PFA vice chairwoman told the Jerusalem Post that Sexwale's FIFA monitoring committee would hold a last-ditch meeting in early May in advance of the FIFA congress.

Rajoub told Al Jazeera that failure to resolve the issue would leave the PFA with "no other choice: we will go to the congress next May in Bahrain and ask for the imposition of sanctions against the Israeli federation."

The PFA would be bolstered in its effort by the fact that Bahrain, its image already tarnished by human rights violations, may want to avoid the embarrassment of having hosted a group that fails to support Palestinian claims.

FIFA could be vulnerable to legal action that would complicate Israeli efforts to avert suspension if the group opts for maintaining the status quo or fails to extend negotiations.

Irrespective of which way FIFA decides to proceed, Israel will be fighting a backbench battle in FIFA as well as other international organizations as long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains unresolved.

Counting on US backing could prove to be a slippery slope with the Trump administration losing leverage and credibility as it plans cutbacks in financial support for the United Nations as well as the State Department, the US's key diplomatic agency.

**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/2017/03/middle-east-soccer-trumps-israel.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](mailto:jmdorsey@questfze.com)**

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