

## **COMMENTARY**

No.219

Friday, 12 September 2014

### **Gaza war puts sporting boycott of Israel**

#### **Back on the front burner**

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**A**hmed Mohammed al Qatar and Udai Jaber's burgeoning soccer careers came to a screeching halt in early August when the two 19-year olds were shot dead by Israeli forces in the West Bank town of Gaza during a protest against the war in Gaza. Days earlier, Ahed Zaqqut, a 49-year old Palestinian soccer legend, who once played in a French team captained by European football governing body UEFA president Michel Platini, died when his home in Gaza was hit by Israeli fire.

The deaths of the three players and the trauma of Israel's heavy handed month long assault on Gaza has not only cast a shadow over Palestinian soccer at a time that the Palestine national team was progressing with its qualification for the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Challenge Cup and upcoming participation in the Philippines' Peace Cup.

Coupled with widespread international condemnation of Israel's conduct of the Gaza war that has left almost 2000 Palestinians dead and many more injured, their deaths have also focused the sports world's attention on problems Palestinian athletes face as a result of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza and fuelled calls for a sporting boycott of Israel as part of a larger boycott, disinvestment campaign.

Among the often gruesome images of the Gaza war that sparked widespread condemnation was video footage of four Palestinian boys killed in an Israeli attack as they were playing soccer on a Gaza beach.

Israel two months ago averted sanctions by world soccer body FIFA with the establishment of an independent committee tasked with monitoring progress in the removal of Israeli obstacles such as restrictions on the freedom of movement of Palestinian players and officials as well as the import of soccer-related goods. The commission is scheduled to report back to the FIFA

executive committee in December. FIFA president Sepp Blatter cautioned when the commission was announced that to succeed the new committee “needs the full support of the Israeli government”.

If the Israeli-Palestinian stand-off remains as it is, the commission may not be able to report a great deal of progress. Israeli restrictions on travel out of the West Bank and between the West Bank and Gaza appear to have become more stringent since the Gaza war. Israel has barred thousands of Palestinians in recent weeks from leaving the West Bank.

“The main obstacle is the occupation and their treatment, daily, of the Palestinian sports community with hatred and enmity; restricting the movement of the players, staff and officials and even the movement of our national teams, whether men or women, from inside to outside (of the West Bank and Gaza) or inside the occupied territories,” said Palestine Football Association (PFA) president Jibril Rajoub on a 20-minute Al Jazeera talk show entitled ‘Is it time for a sporting boycott of Israel?’

Rajoub, widely believed to be positioning himself as a candidate in Palestinian presidential elections, has stopped short in recent interviews of reviving his call for FIFA suspension of Israeli membership. “We need to try to develop and invest in football in Palestine, despite the difficulties we face... We believe football should remain a tool to build bridges between people. Personally, I've been very saddened by the loss of Palestinian life in the conflict,” he said.

Rajoub may find his back peddling difficult to maintain as the prospects for renewed fighting in Gaza loom large with ceasefire talks in Cairo between Israel and Hamas making little progress. The campaign to pressure FIFA to sanction Israel was part of a broader Israeli Palestinian move to gain recognition of Palestinian statehood through membership in international organizations and isolate Israel in the wake of the breakdown in April of US-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peace talks.

Pressure on the Palestinian by the donors of President Mahmoud Abbas’ Palestine Authority persuaded the Palestinians to put on hold plans to join the International Criminal Court which would have allowed them to mount a legal challenge against Israel. The Gaza war has however moved alleged Israeli war crimes centre stage and strengthened Hamas, the Islamist group that controls Gaza and has been calling for charging Israel for its conduct of the war.

The Gaza war moreover has made fending off the threat of sanctions against Israel amid international sentiment towards the Jewish state a major priority for the Israeli government and growing calls for Israel to negotiate directly with Hamas rather than through third parties.

That sentiment was already building in important segments of the international sports community prior to the Gaza war. Last year, more than 60 prominent European players, including Chelsea's Eden Hazard, Arsenal's Abou Diaby and Paris Saint-Germain's Jeremy Menez, protested against Israel’s hosting of the UEFA Under-21 championship. They warned that it would be “seen as a reward for actions that are contrary to sporting values... We, as European football players, express our solidarity with the people of Gaza who are living under siege and denied basic human dignity and freedom,” the players said in a statement.

The stakes for Israel and the Palestinians are high. Israel cannot afford to become an international outcast while the Palestinians see anti-Israeli sentiment as an opportunity to further their cause. To avoid blacklisting at least on the soccer pitch, Israel could ease restrictions on Palestinian football.

Doing that however would likely be perceived as bowing to pressure, in the absence of a Palestinian-Israeli agreement on a long-lasting ceasefire in Gaza that would have to involve a controlled softening, if not lifting of the blockade. That is a tall order with the talks in Cairo hanging on a bare thread.

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link:

<http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2014/08/gaza-war-puts-sporting-boycott-of.html>

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