



## COMMENTARY

No.222

Thursday, 18 September 2014

### **Palestinians Pressure UEFA Not to Award the Tournament to Israel**

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**P**alestinian soccer clubs and non-governmental organizations have called on European soccer governor UEFA to shy away from awarding Israel the right to host the 2020 UEFA European Championship.

The campaign against Israel, one of 12 hopefuls expecting a decision in a 19 September UEFA meeting, is part of a boycott campaign that was boosted by the recent seven-week long Israeli Palestinian war in Gaza. The war ended with a ceasefire designed to open the door to negotiations on long-term arrangements that would lift an Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the strip.

The clubs and NGOs reminded UEFA president Michel Platini in a letter dated 9 September that he had warned Israel that it “must choose between allowing Palestinian sport to continue and prosper or be forced to face the consequences for their behaviour.”

The letter signed by a host of clubs and other NGOs puts Jibril Rajoub, the head of the Palestine Olympic Committee and the Palestine Football Association (PFA), both of which were absent among the signatories of the letter, in a difficult spot.

Rajoub, widely believed to be positioning himself as a candidate in Palestinian presidential elections, helped Israel in early June avert sanctions by world soccer body FIFA by dropping calls for the suspension of the Jewish state’s membership. Instead, Rajoub agreed to the establishment of an independent FIFA committee tasked with monitoring progress in the removal of Israeli obstacles to Palestinian soccer 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 FIFA's executive committee in December.

The Palestinian sports czar argued in a recent 20-minute Al Jazeera talk show entitled 'Is it time for a sporting boycott of Israel?' that "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.. 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," Rajoub said.

Rajoub's assertions of Israeli harassment were given a boost by a letter of 43 mostly active Israeli reservists stating that they would refuse future service in the Israeli military intelligence wing, Unit 8200, which is often described as the equivalent of the United States National Security Agency. Unit 8200 monitors Palestinians using sophisticated technology. The Israelis said in their letter to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel Defence Forces chief of staff Binyamin 'Benny' Gantz, and head of military intelligence Brigadier General Herzl Levi that their refusal was a result of the methods used by Unit 8200 and the toll they take on innocent civilians in occupied Palestinian territories.

The letter said the methods included gathering personal information about a person's sexual preference, marital fidelity or health needs and using it to blackmail the individual into collaborating with Israeli authorities. The letter quoted its signatories as saying in the form of witness statements that "the notion of rights for Palestinians does not exist at all, not even as an idea to be disregarded" and "any Palestinian may be targeted and may suffer from sanctions, such as the denial of permits, harassment, extortion, or even direct physical injury." The Israeli military denied the allegations in a statement saying that "the Intelligence Corps has no record that the specific violations in the letter ever took place." The statement said Unit 8200's mission was to protect Israeli civilians.

The campaign also casts a shadow on the credibility of the Palestine Authority (PA) headed by President Mahmoud Abbas that has walked a thin line between backing sanctions against Israel in the wake of the war in which some 2,000 Palestinians were killed and more than 10,000 wounded. Some 70 Israelis also died as a result of the hostilities.

Abbas' PA needs to be seen as adopting a harder line in pressing Israel to genuinely negotiate a peace agreement with the Palestinians after Hamas, the Islamist militia that controls the Gaza Strip, emerged reinvigorated as the force that had confronted Israeli military superiority. The campaign to pressure UEFA is part of a broader Palestinian move to force Israel's hand by gaining recognition of Palestinian statehood through membership in international organizations.

That campaign is tempered by Abbas' need to avoid disrupting his financial lifeline by crossing PA's Western donors. As a result, Abbas has shied away from plans backed by Hamas and other militant Palestinian groups to charge Israel with war crimes in the International Criminal Court.

The Palestinian soccer clubs and NGOs asserted in their letter to Platini that awarding Israel the 2020 European Championship would be tantamount to rewarding it for its widely criticized conduct of the Gaza war. Israel has been accused of at best failing to avoid high civilian casualties during the Gaza war and at worst targeting highly populated areas. Israel has argued that it was aiming at military targets but that Hamas and other Palestinian groups had been using civilians as human shields by stationing their rocket launchers and other weapons in densely populated areas.

The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions Committee, which had been campaigning for the sanctioning of Israel before the Gaza war quoted its Gaza coordinator, Abdulrahman Abunahel, as saying that "giving Israel the privilege of hosting a major international sports tournament just weeks after it has carried out a bloody massacre of Palestinians in the besieged Gaza strip would give a green light to future war crimes. Palestinians in Gaza enjoy the beautiful game as much as anyone else but Israel has launched a war on football, killing footballers, bombing stadiums and refusing to allow players to travel to matches. UEFA must live up to its stated commitment to human rights and show Israel the red card."

Abunahel was referring to the deaths during the war of 19-year old players Ahmad Muhammad al-Qatar and Uday Caber as well as 49-year-old Palestinian soccer legend Ahed Zaqout and the reported destruction of 32 Gazan sports facilities and damaging of some 500 athletes' homes.

The letter charged further that awarding the European tournament to Israel would legitimize Israel's alleged displacement of Palestinians from predominantly Palestinian East Jerusalem, which it said was void of soccer facilities as a result of restrictions on Palestinian development. Israel's allies, including the United States, recently criticized the Jewish state for its expropriation of 400 hectares of land between Jerusalem and Bethlehem as collective punishment for the killing earlier this year of three Israeli teenagers.

"If UEFA decides to allow part of its football tournament to take place in Jerusalem, it will be providing tacit support to the serious violations of international law that Israel is committing in the city", Abunahel said.

**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/2014/09/palestinians-pressure-uefa-not-to-award.html>

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