

COMMENTARY

No.244

Wednesday 19 November 2014

Mounting Israeli-Palestinians Tensions Reverberate on the Soccer Pitch

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Mounting tension between Israel and Palestinians on the occupied West Bank and in East Jerusalem have spilt on to Israeli Palestinian soccer pitches in Israel proper as Israel swings towards ultra-nationalists that make Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu look like the best card in a bad hand.

Israeli human rights and legal advocacy group Adalah – The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights charged in a petition to the Tel Aviv district court that the Israel Football Association (IFA) was segregating Israeli and Palestinian teams and discriminating Israeli Palestinian players in its Shomron amateur division. Adalah was acting on behalf of Muhammad Lutfi from the Israeli town of Umm al-Fahem, the father of a young Israeli Palestinian soccer player.

In its petition to the court Adalah said the IFA had advised 13 of the 15 Palestinian teams in the division that they were being moved into a division for Palestinians only. The remaining two Palestinian teams would be grouped in a division alongside 12 Israeli Jewish teams, Adalah said. Adalah asserted that the regrouping was sparked by objections by some Israeli Jewish parents against their children playing with Palestinians.

The case was filed in the wake of this summer's Gaza war during which fuelled anti-Palestinian and ultra-nationalist sentiment in Israel. With Netanyahu privately anticipating early elections, Economy Minister Naftali Bennett, the leader of the Jewish Home party and a proponent of the Israeli settler movement has emerged as a formidable threat to the prime minister.

Bennett has threatened to bring the government down by abstaining if not voting in favour of a no-confidence vote in parliament if Netanyahu refuses to authorize further housing projects in occupied Palestinian territory. Netanyahu could waylay Bennett's effort by reaching out to religious parties.

The Israeli Palestinian soccer tensions also come amid increasing unrest in Jerusalem with Palestinian youths and Israeli security forces clashing over access to the Temple Mount or Haram al-Sharif, which is holy to both Jews and Muslims. The stealth acquisition by Israeli settlers of properties in Jerusalem's predominantly Palestinian district of Silwan that sits just under the Temple Mount has further fuelled tension. Jewish residents have moved into the newly acquired properties in the neighbourhood in the middle of the night in a bid to avert Palestinian protests.

In a letter to the parents involved in the court case, the IFA appeared to acknowledge that objections by Israeli Jewish parents had played a role in its decision. "We will not contradict the desires of the clubs (regarding the divisions), and we will not force a child to play in a league that is not joyful for him/her and that does not help his/her professional development". The IFA said it was referring to differing playing levels.

"The petition contended that segregation between children based on their national belonging delivers a negative message that Arab teams are unwanted and are not skilled enough to play with Jewish teams. This message is offensive to children and violates their right to equality with Jewish children... the decision of the IFA to segregate the teams, even if only in certain areas, reinforces discrimination and prejudices against Arab citizens of Israel," Adalah said in a statement.

"Furthermore, the IFA's decision to not distribute teams according to objective general standards, regardless of national belonging, will strengthen and perpetuate the lack of respect and lack of acceptance of others. This is particularly important in the matter of children's sports, where it should not only teach children to be successful but to also teach them the values of mutual respect for different people," Adalah said.

The law suit coincided with the imposition by the IFA of a fine on Israeli's leading Palestinian team, Bnei Sakhnin, long viewed as a symbol of Israeli-Palestinian co-existence, for engaging in politics by honouring a controversial Israeli Palestinian former member of parliament as well as Qatar. Israel has turned on Qatar because of the Gulf state's support for Hamas, the Islamist militia that controls the Gaza strip, and the Muslim Brotherhood.

The honouring was intended as an expression of gratitude to former deputy Azmi Bishara for arranging funding from Qatar for the club at the height of the Gaza war. Qatar is the only Arab country that does not officially recognize Israel to have openly invested in the Jewish State. Bnei

Sakhnin it turned to Bishara for help after Israel authorities had refused to come to the club's financial rescue.

Bishara, a close associate of Qatari emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, moved to Qatar in 2007 amid suspicion that he had spied for Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war.

To be sure, the 15,000 Israeli shekel (US\$ 4,000) fine was light against the backdrop of calls by members of Netanyahu's cabinet, including Culture and Sport Minister Limor Livnat and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman, to expel Bnei Sakhnin from Israel's Premier League.

Israeli-Palestinian tension was further reflected in soccer with fans of Beitar Jerusalem, Israel's most racist anti-Palestinian, anti-Muslim soccer group chanting during a soccer match this week "Jerusalem is ours" and "48," a reference to the 1948 Israeli-Arab war from which Israel emerged as an independent state. The Beitar fans were responding to a banner hoisted in Bnei Sakhnin's Doha Stadium during a match immediately after the controversial ceremony which had the words "Jerusalem is ours" inscribed beneath a picture of the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, one of Islam's holiest sites.

Israeli President Reuven Rivlin summed up the mounting tension by saying that "Jerusalem cannot be a city where the light rail, which services all the city's residents, is attacked in a way that threatens the ability to lead a normal life." He was referring to the ramming of a train station by a Palestinian car driver. A three-month old baby was killed in the incident. It was not clear whether the incident was an accident or an attack by the driver. "Jerusalem cannot be a city into which moving into apartments happens in the middle of the night," he went on to say.

Israeli youths responded to the train station incident with a demonstration calling for revenge. "Arabs, beware! Jewish blood is not valueless," they chanted.

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/2014/10/mounting-israeli-palestinians-tensions.html>

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