

COMMENTARY

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Gulf-Iranian Proxy War Spills onto the Soccer Pitch

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A Saudi-led proxy war against Iran playing out in Syria and Iraq has expanded onto the soccer pitch with a last minute decision by the Palestinian national team to cancel a friendly against Iran. The cancellation officially on technical grounds came barely two weeks before Iran meets two of its Gulf nemeses, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, in politically loaded matches during the Asian Cup in Australia. It also highlights internal divisions among the Palestinians as Hamas, the Islamist group in control of Gaza, seeks to patch up its differences with Iran.

Iranian suspicion that the Palestinian cancellation four days before the friendly was scheduled to take place is rooted in close ties between the Palestinian Authority on the West Bank headed by President Mahmoud Abbas and conservative Gulf States as well as Abbas's deteriorating relations with Hamas. Iranian officials and soccer analysts doubt the cancellation had anything to do with soccer.

The officials and analysts noted that the Palestinian squad had recently trained and played matches in the UAE and Saudi Arabia whose relations with Iran have long been strained. The two Gulf States alongside Bahrain believe that Iran has sought to fuel discontent in their countries and is responsible for the popular uprising in Bahrain that was brutally suppressed in 2011 as well as unrest in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich, predominantly Shiite Muslim Eastern Province.

Saudi Arabia whose puritan Wahhabi interpretation of Islam is inherently anti-Shiite has poured billions of dollars into becoming a dominant force in Muslim communities across the globe since the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Saudi responses to the popular revolts that have swept the

Arab world in recent years and sparked a brutal civil war in Syria as well as to the crisis in Iraq and the rise of jihadist groups like the Islamic State, which controls a swath of Iraq and Syria, have been characterized by their anti-Shiite, anti-Iranian overtones. To be sure, the Islamic State is no less sectarian with its murderous campaigns against Shiites and other religious minorities.

The Saudi responses reflect the fact that the kingdom's ruling family cloaks itself in the mantle of Islam to justify its absolute power that is becoming increasingly harsh in its crackdown on domestic dissent. A Saudi court in recent days referred to a court that deals with terrorism cases two women arrested a month ago for violating a ban on women driving. Saudi rulers see any alternative form of Islamic government, particularly ones that involve popular legitimization through elections like Iran or the rise in Egypt of the Muslim Brotherhood with the election in 2012 of Mohammed Morsi, as a direct threat. Morsi was toppled a year later in a Saudi and UAE-backed military coup.

In a letter to his Iranian counterpart, Palestine Football Association (PFA) secretary general Abd Al-Majid Hujjah said his squad had just returned from a visit to China and was preparing for next month's Asian Cup in Australia and therefore was unable to travel to Iran. Hujjah stressed Palestine's brotherly relations with Iran and expressed hope that the countries' teams would have a future opportunity to meet.

The PFA, locked into a campaign to get Israel suspended by world soccer body FIFA for alleged obstruction of the development of Palestinian football that is part of a broader effort to squeeze Israel within international organizations, needs Gulf support. Palestinian peace negotiator Saeb Erekat was quoted by Israeli media as saying that the United Nations Security Council could vote within days on a resolution that would call on Israel to withdraw from occupied Palestinian territory by 2017. After years of failed mediation efforts, FIFA this month warned that Israel could be sanctioned if it failed to ensure the free movement of Palestinian players.

The Palestinian cancellation of the Iranian match came not only at a sensitive moment in Palestinian diplomacy but also at a time that efforts to bridge the divide between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas are faltering further. Hamas charged that the authority's security forces had this week arrested 14 of its operatives on the West Bank.

Squeezed by pressure from both Israel and Egypt in the wake of this summer's destructive war with Israel, Hamas sent a delegation to Tehran earlier this month to repair relations ruptured by the Sunni Muslim Islamist militia's refusal to back the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. A renewal of ties would not only complicate Hamas' relations with the authority but would also serve Iran's argument that it is the Gulf States rather than the Islamic Republic that is fuelling sectarianism in the Middle East.

PFA President Jibril Rajoub, who a year ago became the first representative of Abbas to visit Tehran in years, has urged Hamas to break its ties to the Muslim Brotherhood – a demand that is in line with Saudi Arabia and the UAE who have outlawed the group as a terrorist organization. Rajoub’s visit focused on efforts to lift a Syrian siege of the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus and win Iranian support for Abbas’ UN efforts.

A deputy secretary of the central committee of Abbas’ Al Fatah movement and former head of Palestinian security, Rajoub needs to reassure Gulf states who worry about the fact that he has close personal ties to Hamas leaders should he want to succeed Abbas as head of the Palestinian Authority. Abbas has suggested on a number of occasions that he wishes to retire.

The Authority and Rajoub are walking a tightrope. Cancellation of the match against Iran will earn them brownie points in the Gulf but not contribute to relations with Iran, which has suggested that it would abide by any decision the Palestinians take with regard to Israel.

“The match against Palestine was agreed upon on October 3. The Palestinians had 80 days but said they were not coming just four days before the match. This is neither legal nor professional... In the worst of cases, this constitutes regional collusion with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia,” charged Mehdi Rostampour, a well-known Iranian soccer analyst, in a posting on his Facebook page.

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/2014/12/gulf-iranian-proxy-war-spills-onto.html>

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