

# **COMMENTARY**

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## **Soccer fields:**

### **A way-station en route to the Islamic State**

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**O**ne thing the biographies of Jihadi John, the Islamic State's executioner of foreign hostages, and several of his European associates have in common is their passion for soccer and their dashed hopes of becoming professional players.

They all belonged to amateur teams or bonded in part by playing soccer together. Like other disaffected youth for whom playing soccer became a stepping stone to joining a militant group or become a suicide bomber, Jihadi John and his mates, traversed football fields on their journey. Their biographies highlight soccer's potential as a recruitment and bonding tool.

Identified as Mohammed Emwazi, Jihadi John a Kuwaiti-born Brit reviled for videos featuring him as the hooded killer of the Islamic State's foreign, non-Arab hostages, dreamt as a child of kicking balls rather than chopping off heads. "What I want to be when I grow up is a footballer," he wrote in his primary school yearbook. He believed that by the age of 30 he would be "in a football team scoring a goal."

In secondary school, Emwazi played soccer matches with five players in two teams whose members went on to become jihadists, The Guardian quoted one of the group's members as saying in evidence presented to an English high court in 2011.

The court case, which related to a control order imposed on one of three of the former players whose movements were legally restricted, Ibrahim Magag, identifies 10-12 men, most of East African or South Asian descent, as members of the same group as Emwazi. Four of the men

attended the same secondary school. Several travelled to Somalia for training before returning to the UK as recruiters.

The control orders barred the three men from living in London. The orders were later replaced by less stringent terrorism prevention and investigation measures (TPIMs) sparking debate on whether the loosening, including a lifting of the ban on residency in London, complicated the efforts of security services to monitor the suspects. The measures did not prevent Magag and a second member of the group from absconding in 2013.

Among the group's members was Bilal Berjawi, a British-Lebanese national, who was stripped of his British citizenship, and like Mohamed Sakr was killed in separate US drone strikes in 2012. The group also included two Ethiopians who have since been barred from returning to Britain on security grounds, a man who trained in an Al Qaeda camp, and an associate of a group that planned but failed to successfully execute attacks in London in July 2005 barely two weeks after four men killed 52 people in bombings of the London transport system.

"They were sporty, not particularly studious young men," The Guardian quoted a person who moved in the same circles as describing Emwazi's group.

Like Emwazi's group, five East Londoners of Portuguese descent, who are believed to have helped produce Jihadi John's gruesome videos, envisioned themselves as becoming soccer players rather than jihadists viewed as accessories to murder in their home countries.

One of them, 28 year-old, Nero Seraiva, tweeted last year on 11 July, days before the execution of American journalist James Foley, the first of the Islamic State's Western hostages to be decapitated: "'Message to America, the Islamic State is making a new movie. Thank u for the actors.'" Foley's decapitation was announced in a video entitled A Message to America.

Fabio Pocas, at 22 the youngest of the Portuguese group, arrived in London in 2012, hoping to become a professional soccer player. In Lisbon, Pocas, a convert to Islam, attended the youth academy of Sporting Lisbon, the alma mater of superstars such as Cristiano Ronaldo and Luis Figo.

In London, he helped amateur league UK Football Finder FC (UKFFFC) win several divisional competitions. The Sunday Times quoted UKFFFC football director Ewemade Orobator as saying that Pocas "came here to play football seriously. In about May 2013 an agent came down and said, 'Work hard over the summer and I will get you a trial (with a professional club).'" Pocas failed to take up the offer and instead travelled to Syria where he adopted the name Abdurahman Al Andalus.

Pocas, according to The Sunday Times, has settled in the Syrian town of Manbij near Aleppo where he has taken a Dutch teenager as his bride. "Holy war is the only solution for humanity," he said in a posting on Facebook.

Illustrated by the cases of Emwazi and his mates and the Portuguese, soccer weaves its way through the history of militant political Islam and jihadism since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Foreigners who fought in Afghanistan alongside the Afghan mujahedeen organized soccer matches after the Soviet withdrawal to maintain contact.

Militant Islamist leaders like Osama Bin Laden, Palestinian Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah Chief Hassan Nasrallah understood soccer's bonding and recruitment qualities. Bin Laden was reported to have organized his fighters in a mini-World Cup in down times during the war in Afghanistan and to have formed two soccer teams among his followers during his years in Sudan in the 1980s.

University of Michigan professor Scott Atran notes that "a reliable predictor of whether or not someone joins the Jihad is being a member of an action-oriented group of friends. It's surprising how many soccer buddies join together."

Atran's yardstick is evident in analysis of past violent incidents. The perpetrators of the 2004 Madrid subway bombings played soccer together and a number of Hamas suicide bombers traced their roots to the same football club in the conservative West Bank town of Hebron.

Mohamed Abdel Rahman, a former Egyptian fighter in Afghanistan and the son of Sheikh Omar Abdel Rahman, who is serving a life sentence in the United States for the first bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, recalled in an interview with CNN that he played soccer in Pakistan with former Egyptian special forces officer Saif al-Adel, a senior Al Qaeda official who has since been killed.

"We played football with a group of fellow jihadists, then had lunch before I left," Abdel Rahman said. "He was a really good football player, sharp and fast."

**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/2015/03/soccer-fields-waystation-en-route-to.html>

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