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2015

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NO. 292

SOCCER VS. JIHAD: A DRAW

JAMES M. DORSEY

**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
SINGAPORE**

22 May 2015

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Abstract

There is much that militant Islamists and jihadists agree on, but when it comes to sports in general and soccer in particular sharp divisions emerge. Men like the late Osama bin Laden, Hamas Gaza leader Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah stand on one side of the ideological and theological divide opposite groups like the Taliban, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, Boko Haram, and the jihadists who took control of northern Mali in 2012. The Islamic State, the jihadist group that controls swaths of Syria and Iraq, belongs ideologically and theologically to the camp that views soccer as an infidel invention designed to distract the faithful from their religious obligations but opportunistically employs football in its sophisticated public relations and public diplomacy endeavour. Bin Laden, Haniyeh and Nasrallah employ soccer as a recruitment and bonding tool based on the belief of Salafi and mainstream Islamic scholars who argue that Prophet Muhammad advocated physical exercise to maintain a healthy body. However, the more militant students of Islam seek to re-write the rules of the game to Islamicise it, if not outright ban the sport. The practicality and usefulness of soccer is evident in the fact that perpetrators of attacks, like those by Hamas on civilian targets in Israel in 2003 and the 2004 Madrid train bombings, bonded by playing soccer together.

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A Taste of Blood

First there was a bright flash, then the sky turned grey as if it was raining. Lori Ssebulime felt broken glass and plastic all around her. Everything seemed to be swirling. She heard screaming from everywhere, tasted blood in her mouth and felt burning sensations on her body. Her table in the Ugandan capital of Kampala's popular Ethiopian Village restaurant had exploded. Minutes later, another bomb wrecked the Kyadondo Rugby Club across town. More than 70 people died in the twin blasts timed to coincide with the 2010 FIFA World Cup final.¹

Lori and five of her Christian missionary friends had arrived early at the restaurant to occupy good seats to watch the match between the Netherlands and Spain. A Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania, school teacher, she and her friends were in Uganda to complete a wall that would keep intruders out of a church-school compound that their Christian community was funding. Six of Lori's fellow missionaries were among the 70 wounded in the attacks claimed by Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen or Movement of Martyr Youth, the Al Qaeda affiliate known more widely as Al Shabaab that was fighting Uganda-led African peacekeepers in Somalia.

In his hiding place in the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan, the late Osama bin Laden, an Arsenal FC fan, must have had mixed feelings when he heard about his jihad's latest Ugandan feat. The world's most notorious terrorist, Osama shared with Al Shabaab as with the Taliban an austere Islamist worldview that proscribes music, gender mixing, women's education, gambling, drinking, homosexuality, shaving of beards as well as the belief that rule by Sharia (Islamic) law can only be achieved in a holy war against infidels.

But when it came to soccer, Bin Laden and Al Shabaab parted ways. They represented two sides of militant Islam's love-hate relationship with the game. Islamist leaders like Bin Laden and Ismail Haniyeh occupied a middle ground in the theological debate about soccer that runs the gamut. Being former soccer players, their enthusiasm and endorsement of the game put them at odds with the more radical jihadists as well as the more conservative Salafi clerics who condemn the sport. Men like Bin Laden and Haniyeh were comfortable with more nuanced Salafi and mainstream scholars who argued that Prophet Mohammed advocated physical exercise to maintain a healthy body. These scholars, who like all Salafis favour the Muslim world's emulation of life at the time of the Prophet and his immediate successors, criticise the effects of the commercialisation of soccer and the fact that it distracts people from the performance of religious duties but also acknowledge that there is nothing in Islamic law that would justify banning the sport or imposing restrictive conditions.

The Kampala bombings were not the first time Bin Laden was straddled between his passion for soccer and his willingness to target his fellow supporters. In 1998, he authorised a plan by Algerian jihadists to attack the 1998 World Cup, pinpointing a match between England and Tunisia scheduled

¹ Lori Ssebulime, Kampala Eyewitness, July 10, 2010, <http://bit.ly/awd53a>, (accessed July 10, 2010)

to be played in Marseille as well as U.S. matches against Germany, Iran and Yugoslavia as targets.² The England-Tunisia match was expected to attract a worldwide television audience of half a billion people while the U.S. match against Iran was already highly political because of the strained relations between the two countries. "This is a game that will determine the future of our planet and possibly the most important single sporting event that's ever been played in the history of the world," said U.S. player Alexi Lalas referring to his squad's match against Iran.³

The plot, that bore hallmarks of the Palestinian assault on the Israeli team at the 1972 Munich Olympics and also included an attack on the Paris hotel of the U.S. team, was foiled when police raided homes in seven European countries and hauled some 100 suspected associates of Algeria's Groupe Islamique Arme (GIA) in for questioning.⁴ Some scholars and journalists have suggested that the failure of the plot persuaded Al Qaeda to opt instead for the bombing of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Nairobi in the summer of 1998 in which 224 people were killed.⁵ Similarly, purported messages by Malaysian-born Al Qaeda-affiliated bomb-maker Noordin Mohammed Top claimed that the Ritz Carlton and Marriott hotel bombings in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta in 2009 were intended to kill the visiting Manchester United team. Nine people were killed and 53 others wounded in the attacks. The bombs exploded two days before the team was scheduled to check into the Ritz, which prompted it to cancel its visit.

Noor said in one of three online statements that the aim of the attacks was "to create an example for the Muslims regarding Wala' (Loyalty) and Baro' (Enmity), especially for the forthcoming visit of the Manchester United (MU) Football Club at the hotel. Those (football) players are made up of salibis (Crusaders). Thus it is not right that the Muslim ummah (community) devote their loyalty (wala') and honour to these enemies of Allah."⁶ A variety of other jihadists allegedly targeted soccer stadiums over the years in a number of foiled or aborted plots, including that of Manchester United,⁷ Jerusalem's Bloomfield in 2004,⁸ Jerusalem's Teddy Kollek Stadium in 2011,⁹ Melbourne's MCG in

² Adam Robinson, *Bin Laden: The Inside Story of the Rise and Fall of the Most Notorious Terrorist in History*, New York: Arcade Publishing, 2011, Kindle edition

³ *Ibid.* Robinson

⁴ Claude Journes, *Policing and Security: Terrorists and Hooligans* in eds Hugh Dauncey and Geoff Hare, *France and the 1998 World Cup: The National Impact of a World Sporting Event*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 150

⁵ Laurant Dubois, *Soccer Empire: The World Cup and the Future of France*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2011), Kindle edition / Simon Kuper, *Soccer Against the Enemy: How the World's Most Popular Sport Starts and Fuels Revolutions and Keeps Dictators in Power*, (New York: Nation Books, 2010), 294-95 / *Ibid.* Robinson

⁶ Fadly, Nur Din M Top, *Klaim Bertanggungjawab atas Peledakan Hotel JW Marriot & Ritz Carlton*, Arrahmah. Com, July 30, 2009, <http://www.arahmah.com/read/2009/07/30/5168-nur-din-m-top-klaim-bertanggungjawab-atas-peledakan-hotel.html> (accessed July 30, 2009)

⁷ Tariq Panja and Martin Bright, *Man U bomb plot probe ends in farce*, *The Guardian*, May 2, 2004, <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2004/may/02/uknews> (accessed June 30, 2010)

⁸ Margaret Dudkevitch, *Palestinian Bomber Planned to Attack Soccer Stadium*, *The Jerusalem Post*, September 21, 2004 (author's archive)

⁹ Anshel Pfeffer, *Two East Jerusalem residents arrested over Hamas plot to fire rockets into Israeli soccer game*, *Haaretz*, January 2, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/two-east-jerusalem-residents-arrested-over-hamas-plot-to-fire-rockets-into-israeli-soccer-game-1.334775> (accessed January 2, 2011)

2005,¹⁰ and a stadium in the U.S. in 2010.¹¹ The Iraqi military said it had arrested a dissident Saudi military officer for being part of an Al Qaeda plot to attack the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.¹²

Players = Pilots

Soccer also figured prominently in Bin Laden's imagery. Speaking to supporters about the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, he drew an analogy to soccer: "I saw in a dream, we were playing a soccer game against the Americans. When our team showed up in the field, they were all pilots! So I wondered if that was a soccer game or a pilot game? Our players were pilots," he said according to a video tape released by the U.S. Defence Department.¹³ Al Qaeda spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith recalled in the video that a television program about 9/11 "was showing an Egyptian family sitting in their living room, they exploded with joy. Do you know when there is a soccer game and your team wins, it was the same expression of joy? There was a subtitle that read: 'In revenge for the children of Al Aqsa', Osama bin Laden executes an operation against America."¹⁴ Abu Ghaith was referring to Islam's third most holy site, the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem.

In many ways the debate among jihadists and clerics about soccer mirrors similar concerns among conservative Christian clergymen. Soccer fans outnumber churchgoers in several West European countries. Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpatkos warned shortly after the 2010 World Cup in South Africa that soccer had become a religion that promoted superstition. "For many people, soccer is a religion, a worship. Several expressions used are taken from religion. Spectators sit in the stands and their 'gods', the soccer players, contest as another twelve/eleven gods in the field for Victory. Since soccer is considered by many as a new worship, there is certainly their own god, the god of soccer. They pray to this non-existing god... The first prize for superstition goes to the English, who for many years now have been worshipping Beckham as the thirteenth Apostle, and this is why they built him a huge statue in Trafalgar Square, to worship in his shadow and pray. The fans of all teams respect the customs of superstition — they cross themselves, they murmur hocus-pocus, they tie their fingers, they pray to Allah. But whatever their religion or their soccer god, after all they remain faithful to the doctrine of self-idolatry," Vlachos warned on an Orthodox website.¹⁵

¹⁰ Gary Hughes, Terror group plot to hit MCG, The Australian, April 16, 2008, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/archive/news/terror-group-plot-to-hit-mcg/story-e6frg6of-111116073582>, (accessed April 18, 2008)

¹¹ The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Chicago Man Charged with Providing Material Support to al Qaeda by Attempting to Send Funds Overseas, March 26, 2010, <http://www.fbi.gov/chicago/press-releases/2010/cg032610-1.htm>, (accessed March 26, 2010)

¹² Fox News, Iraq Says It Uncovered Al Qaeda Plot on World Cup, May 17, 2010, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/05/17/iraq-says-uncovered-al-qaeda-plot-world-cup/>, (accessed May 17, 2010)

¹³ US Defence Department, Transcript of Usama Bin Laden Video Tape, December 13, 2001, <http://web.archive.org/web/20060623051212/http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Dec2001/d20011213ubl.pdf>, (accessed December 14, 2001)

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hierotheos Vlachos, The "god" of soccer and Jesus Prayer, The Orthodox Christian Channel – OCC247, October 28, 2010, <http://philotimo-leventia.blogspot.com/2010/10/god-of-soccer-rev-metropolitan-of.html>, (accessed October 28, 2010)

Similarly, Monsignor Keith Barltrop of Britain's dismantled Catholic Agency to Support Evangelisation praised Brazilian international Ricardo Kaka, a devout Christian, who has the words "God is faithful" stitched on his boots and tears off his jersey to reveal a T-shirt that boasts "I love Jesus", saying "it is good to have positive role models." Barltrop worried that the excitement generated by pop stars and sporting celebrities "leads to a life of hedonism."¹⁶ For its part, the Vatican, much like the Islamic Movement in Israel and Saudi clerics who developed rules for what they described as an acceptable Muslim form of soccer, created in 2007 "The Clericus Cup", an international tournament for priests and seminarians aimed at bringing the church closer to believers and "reinvigorating a sporting tradition within the Christian community."¹⁷ And like mosques that sponsor soccer teams, up to a third of Britain's Premier League was founded in association with a church and with the help of the clergy.¹⁸ By the same token, Islamic clerics endorse expressions of religiosity on the pitch and rejection of Western vices by some of Europe's most prominent Muslim players.¹⁹

Jordanian-born Palestinian Salafi Sheikh Mashhoor Bin Hasan Al Salman,²⁰ a cleric who demonstrates knowledge of European soccer, summed up the Islamic clerical divide over soccer in a treatise published in 1998. The treatise is a long articulation of militant arguments against soccer citing a slew of clerics, including Saudi scholar and judge Hamoud al-Tuwayjur,²¹ the late Saudi Grand Mufti Abdulaziz bin Abdullah ibn Baz, Egyptian scholar Abdul Razak Afifi, and Saudi scholars Abdul Aziz as Salman,²² Abdullah bin Ghudayan and Abdullah bin Qu'ud,²³ Egyptian scholar, columnist and author Abdul Halim Uways,²⁴ Palestinian masters student Shukri Ali al Tawil,²⁵ and Egyptian Ahmad Shalabi,²⁶ but fell short on countering them. While Salman appears to agree with many of their arguments, he made clear that he believes that soccer also contains elements and values that put it in line with Islamic morals and standards.

¹⁶ BCNN1, Christian Sports Spotlight: Kaka, BCNN1.com, No date, <http://blackchristiannews.com/news/christian-sports-spotlight-kaka.html>, (accessed January 2, 2013)

¹⁷ Clericus Cup, <http://www.clericuscup.it/Index.aspx?idmenu=3592>, (accessed January 2, 2013)

¹⁸ Robert Anthony Ellis, *The Games People Play: Theology, Religion, and Sport*, (Eugene: Wpf & Stock, 2014), Kindle edition / Peter Lupson, *Thank God for Football* (London, SPCK Publishing, 2010)

¹⁹ Amar Singh, 'My manager told me to choose between fasting or playing – I chose to fast' - how Muslim footballers including Mesut Ozil and Amr Zaki approach Ramadan, Goal.com, August 27, 2011, <http://www.goal.com/en-gb/news/2871/special/2011/08/27/2637353/my-manager-told-me-to-choose-between-fasting-or-playing-i>, (accessed August 27, 2011)

²⁰ Sheikh Mashhoor Bin Hasan Al Salman, *كُررتْ لِقَدَم، بَيْنَ الْمَسَلِه وَ ل مَفَّ سِد سه-سَهْرُ بِيَه*, (Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazam, 1998), 1-41

²¹ Sheikh Hamoud al Tuwayjur, *ال دَه وَ ل تَبْيِين لَمْ وَقْ فِيَه ل كَثَهْرِيْن مِنْ مُسْبِهَت ل مُسَهْرِكُو*, (Riyadh: Mo'sasat al-Nour, 1964)

²² Sheikh Abdul Aziz as Salman, *ل نَبَلَه وَ ل جَوْبَه ل فِقْهِي*, (Riyadh, 1981) Salman lists balls alongside film, radio and the shaving of beards as evils that corrupt morality and provoke dissension. He warns that "what is called football prompts people to discard prayer, waste time, employ foul language such as curses and slander, expose the 'awrah (the part of the male body between the navel and the knees) and forget the memory of Allah. There is no doubt that soccer is prohibited if it provokes these things, including in mature, intelligent people."

²³ Sheikh Abdulaziz bin Abdullah ibn Baz, Sheikh Abdul Razak Afifi, Sheikh Abdullah bin Ghudayan and Sheikh Abdullah bin Qu'ud, Fatwas no 2857 (8 Rabi al Awal 1400/ January 26, 1980), no 3323 (9 Dhul Hijja 1400 / October 18, 1980) and no 4967 (20 Ramadan 1402 / October 8, 1982), Standing Committee for Islamic Ruling and Research in Saudi Arabia, Riyadh

²⁴ Abdul Halim Uways, *مُسَهْكَلَت سه-سه-ب فِ دَوْل-سَلَم*, (Cairo: by Dar al-Wafa, 2005), 89

²⁵ Shukri Ali al-Tawil, *ال-قَمَر وَ تَوَه فِ دَوْل سه-سَهْرُ ل سَلَمِي*, (Master Thesis, Amman: University of Jordan, 1988), 144-148

²⁶ Ahmad Shalabi, *ال هَيْت ل جِيْمِيَه فِ تَكْوَر ل سَلَم*, (Cairo: University of Cairo, 1982), 235

“Football training is in the realm of the permissible, as we do not know of any proof that prohibits it. The origin of a thing is that it is permissible (a principle in *fiqh* — Islamic jurisprudence) and there is nothing that distances soccer from permissible actions as long as a Muslim does it in order to strengthen the body and use it as a means for strength, exercise and vitality. In fact, the legislation allows it for reasons that it will strengthen one’s body for the purpose of striving in the path of Allah. It is verified that the Messenger of Allah (*sallallaahu alayhi wassalam* {Peace be upon Him}) stated: “The strong believer is better and more beloved by Allah than a weak believer even though there is good in both of them,” Salman concluded.²⁷ Distancing himself from interpretations of jihad to justify terrorism, Salman relied on Al-Tuwayjur’s referral to 14th century Islamic scholar Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah,²⁸ widely viewed as a co-founder of the Hanbal school of Islamic legal thought and an inspiration for contemporary militant Islamists and jihadists. Al-Tuwayjur quoted Ibn Taymiyyah as saying that “ball games are good as long as the intention of the one practicing it is for the benefit of training horses and men, so as to help them in attacking and retreating, and in entering, withdrawing and performing similar actions during jihad. The purpose is to secure help during jihad, which Allah and his Commander (Peace be upon Him) commanded. However, such games are forbidden if they have any detrimental effect on horses and men.”²⁹

Salman interpreted Ibn Taymiyyah’s statement as detrimental to anything that would distract a Muslim from performing his religious obligations. He argued on the basis of opinions of Saudi scholars that soccer is forbidden if it “becomes a common habit that commands too much of a person’s time,” involves clothing that exposes thighs or anything above it or spectators watching players whose bodies are exposed in ways that violate Islamic dress code.³⁰ In a later treatise, Salman’s thinking however appeared to have evolved to conclude that soccer was distracting believers from their religious obligations. “Football now has become one of the destructive hoes which our enemies are using in order to destroy the Islamic Ummah (community),” he said. Salman’s conclusion was prompted by his observation that thousands of Muslims give priority to supporting their team during a match above going to daily prayers if the timing of the two coincides.³¹

In his original treatise, Salman quoted extensively the banning of soccer by Muhammad ibn Ibrahim Al Sheikh, a late Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia — the country’s highest religious authority — but proceeded to take issue with the ban itself. Al Sheikh, who was in office until his death in 1969, banned the institutionalisation of soccer by establishing leagues, associations and governing bodies.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Al Salman

²⁸ Sheikh Taqi ad-Din Ahmad ibn Taymiyyah, *الموضوع: حمل: مختصر الفتاوى المصرية لشيخ الإسلام ابن تيمية - بدر الدين البعلبي*, <http://majles.alukah.net/showthread.php?11336-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%AA%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%89-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%84%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A5%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%8A-pdf> (Accessed July 29, 2012)

²⁹ *Ibid.* Al Salman

³⁰ *Ibid.* Al Salman

³¹ Sheikh Mashhoor Bin Hasan Aal Salman, *Mistakes regarding Friday Salat*, 2006, <http://www.salafitalk.net/st/uploads/Ch6.pdf> (Accessed September 3, 2010)

Al Sheikh warned that “the nature of the game sparks fanatical partisanship, trouble, and the emergence of hate and malice,” which contradict Islamic notions of “tolerance, brotherhood, rectification and purification of hearts and sows resentment, grudges, and discord that exist among losers and winners of the game.” He cautioned further that soccer can spark violence. “So from this, soccer is prohibited... Soccer does not serve the goal of things that justify allowing sport activities under the divine law of Islam such as exercise of the body, training in fighting or the curing of chronic illness” Al Sheikh ruled. In addition, he argued that soccer leads to the postponement of prayers for which there “is no legal excuse” and encourages gambling and betting in violation of Islamic law.³²

Salman countered Al Sheikh by reasoning that “within the context of Islam and its way of building societies, soccer is among games endorsed by Islam as is the study of it. Soccer involves studying lessons in unity as opposed to splitting, mutual love as opposed to hatred and animosity.” He defined soccer as a game that emphasises those values and whose “values cannot be realised but through teamwork (in which) the team is greater than the individual.”³³

The debate about soccer is reminiscent of clerical opposition to the introduction of the game in the early 20th century in Turkey and Iran, immediately after the 1979 Islamic revolution that overthrew the Shah. Once popularised, religious forces in Iran recognised the game’s political advantages and were quick to embrace them. The debate is also reflected in advice rendered to believers on Saudi Arabia’s official fatwa website operated by the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta (Fatwa), which effectively endorsed the game but banned competitions — an approach that has been ignored by the government with a member of the royal family overseeing the country’s leagues.

The presidency in a ruling told a merchant to close his shop and go to the mosque to pray because a television set in his store was broadcasting soccer matches that distracted people from their religious obligations. It justified its advice with a quote from the Quran: “O you who believe! Let not your properties or your children divert you from the remembrance of Allah. And whosoever does that, then they are the losers.”³⁴ Another fatwa, permitting soccer but banning soccer competitions read: “Contests are only permissible when they can be sought for help in fighting Kuffar (disbelievers) like that of camels, horses, arrows, and the like of other fighting machines such as planes, tanks and submarines, whether they are held for prizes or not. Whereas if these games are not sought for help in wars like football, boxing and wrestling, it is impermissible to take part in them if the contests include prizes for winners.”³⁵ Yet another fatwa cautioned that “attending football matches and

³² *Ibid.* Al Salman / Sheikh Mohammed bin Ibrahim bin Abdul Latif Al Sheikh, فتاوى ورسائل سمّيت لسهوكة، مُهمّدين برهم بين بدل أئيف آل سهوكة (Mecca: Government Printing Press, 1399/1979), Vol. 8, 3

³³ *Ibid.* Al Salman

³⁴ The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, Fatwas of the Permanent Committee, Group 1, Volume 13: Transactions 1, Part No. 13; Page No. 63, Fatwa no. 16502, <http://www.alifta.net/Fatawa/FatawaChapters.aspx?language=en&View=Page&PageID=4603&PageNo=1&BookID=7> / Quran, Al-Munafiqoon(63), Verse No. (9), <https://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/63-9.html>

³⁵ *Ibid.* Fatwas of the Permanent Committee, Group 1, Volume 15: Transactions 3, Fatwa no. 332, <http://alifta.com/Search/ResultDetails.aspx?lang=en&view=result&fatwaNum=&FatwaNumID=&ID=5605&searchScope=7&SearchScopeLevels1=&SearchScopeLevels2=&highLight=1&SearchType=exact&SearchMoesar=false&bookID=&LeftVal=0&RightVal=0&simple=&SearchCriteria=allwords&PagePath=&siteSection=1&searchkeyword=10211111116098097108108#firstKeyWordFound> (Accessed October 1, 2011)

watching them is unlawful for a person who knows that they are played for a reward, for attending such matches involves approving of them."³⁶

The twisted rulings of the more radical Egyptian and Saudi clergy meanwhile provided the theological underpinnings of the attitude towards soccer of militant groups like the Taliban and Boko Haram, informed Al Shabaab's drive to recruit soccer-playing kids in Somalia, and inspired some players to become fighters and suicide bombers in foreign lands. They also fuelled a debate about the participation of three Muslim nations — Saudi Arabia, Iran and Tunisia — in the 2006 World Cup. Militant clerics denounced the tournament as a "plot aiming to corrupt Muslim youth and distract them from jihad" and "a cultural invasion worse than military war because it seizes the heart and soul of the Muslim."³⁷ They dubbed the World Cup the "Prostitution Cup" because of the influx of prostitutes into Germany in advance of the games.³⁸

Writing under the name Abu Haytham, a cleric asserted that "while our brothers in Iraq, Palestine, and Afghanistan are being massacred in cold blood by the Crusaders and the Jews, our young people will have their eyes riveted on depraved television sets which emit the opium of soccer to the extent of overdose."³⁹ In a similar vein, Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, a prominent Kuwaiti Salafist, issued a fatwa on his website that was widely circulated on jihadist forums declaring that "it is illicit to watch these matches on corrupt television channels while our nation is decimated night and day by foreign armies."⁴⁰ A banned British pan-Islamist website advocating the creation of an Islamic state in the United Kingdom asserted that soccer promotes nationalism as part of a "colonial crusader scheme" to divide Muslims and cause them to stray from the vision of a unified Islamic identity. "The sad fact of the matter is that many Muslims have fallen for this new religion and they too carry the national flag," it said.⁴¹

Militant clerics differed on the fatwas and Salafi campaigns in fierce debates on Islamist websites. More moderate religious leaders and government officials weighed into the discussion about the role of soccer in society. Syrian scholar Abd-al Mun'em Mustafa Halima Abu Basir, better known as Abu Basir al-Tartus, who is widely viewed as a spiritual jihadist influence, broke ranks with his militant brethren in 2006 by declaring that there is "no objection to soccer, playing sports as a means of entertainment" but that it was forbidden to watch World Cup matches because they distract believers

³⁶ *Ibid.* Fatwas of the Permanent Committee, Group 1, Volume 15: Transactions 3, Fatwa no. 18951, <http://alifta.com/Search/ResultDetails.aspx?lang=en&view=result&fatwaNum=&FatwaNumID=&ID=5637&searchScope=7&SearchScopeLevels1=&SearchScopeLevels2=&highLight=1&SearchType=exact&SearchMoesar=false&bookID=&LeftVal=0&RightVal=0&simple=&SearchCriteria=allwords&PagePath=&siteSection=1&searchkeyword=102111111116098097108108#firstKeyWordFound> (Accessed October 1, 2011)

³⁷ Habib Trabelsi, Islamists denounce 'opium of football', Mail & Guardian, June 24, 2006, <http://mg.co.za/article/2006-06-24-islamists-denounce-opium-of-football> (Accessed June 25, 2006)

³⁸ *Ibid.* Trabelsi

³⁹ Moshe Terdman, The Ball is not always Round: The Attitude to Soccer between Jihadi-Radical and Moderate Muslims, Prism Papers on Islamist Social Affairs, Global Research in International Affairs (Herzliya: (GLORIA) Center, 2006), Number 1, December,

⁴⁰ Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali, '...!كأس العالم', June 25, 2006, http://h-alali.net/z_open.php?id=fb9ed57c-eadb-1029-a62a-0010dc91cf69; <http://wincoast.com/forum/archive/index.php/t-34956.html> (Accessed October 3, 2011)

⁴¹ Yaakov Lappin, 'Jihadist site: Soccer is against Islam,' Ynetnews, 21 June 2006, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3265595.00.html> (Accessed June 21, 2006)

from the abuses of Arabs in Iraq, Palestine and elsewhere. Al-Tartus asserted that on the day of the opening of the Cup in Germany, billions of people clung to television screens while “the Zionist Jews bombed civilians.”⁴² Radical Islamists also posted a video of their own World Cup on the internet that showed scenes of the 9/11 attacks, the killing and torture of Palestinians, the Guantánamo Bay detention facility in Cuba, and the abuse of Iraqi inmates by U.S. forces in the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. In its introduction, the video said that “at a time when pro-Zionist Arab media are busy broadcasting the World Cup to divert Muslims away from their religion and from jihad...we offer you the three other cups which those media are trying to hide from our nation.”⁴³ One Islamist, Sa’ad al Wissi, who identified himself as “an extremist” insisted that he could “find no problem in watching the matches. Your calls to boycott the World Cup are doomed to fail,” Al Wissi said.⁴⁴

A controversial 2005 ruling circulated on the internet by anonymous militant clerics in Saudi Arabia, the world’s most puritanical Muslim nation, is believed to have motivated three Saudi players to join the jihad in Iraq. Published as the Saudi national team prepared to compete in the 2006 World Cup, the fatwa denounced the game as an infidel invention and redrafted its International Football Association Board (IFAB) approved rules to differentiate it from that of the heretics. It banned words like foul, goal, corner and penalty. It ordered players to wear their ordinary clothes or pyjamas instead of shorts and T-shirt and to spit on anyone who scored a goal. It did away with the role of referees by banning the drawing of lines to demarcate the pitch and ordering that fouls and disputes be adjudicated on the basis of the Sharia rather than by issuing yellow or red cards. “If you ... intend to play soccer, play to strengthen the body in order to better struggle in the way of God and to prepare the body for when it is called to jihad. Soccer is not for passing time or the thrill of so-called victory,” the fatwa said. It dictated that the game should be played in anything — “one half or three halves” — but the internationally accepted two halves of 45 minutes each “which is the official time of the Jews, Christians and all the heretical and atheist countries.”

The ruling was based on an earlier fatwa issued in 2002 by radical Saudi cleric Abdullah al-Najdi,⁴⁵ a descendant of one of the companions of Mohammed ibn Abdul Wahhab — the 18th century warrior priest who founded Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia’s austere school of Islamic thought. Echoing Al Najdi, Egyptian-born Sheikh Abu Ishaq Al Huwani said on YouTube: “All fun is bootless except the playing of a man with his wife, his son and his horse... Thus, if someone sits in front of the television to watch football or something like that, he will be committing bootless fun... We have to be a serious nation, not a playing nation. Stop playing.”⁴⁶

Saudi officials and columnists responded by denying that soccer violated Islamic law. They accused the issuers of anti-soccer fatwas of misleading Saudi youth and called for a re-examination of the

⁴² *Ibid.* Terdman

⁴³ *Ibid.* Terdman;
<http://www.tajdeed.org.uk/forums/showthread.php?s=28a75f0fc6667bc7962b22201e0cdf7f&threadid=42893>
(Accessed January 11, 2007)

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Terdman

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* Terdman

⁴⁶ Sheikh Abu Ishaq Al Huwani, The Ruling of Watching Football Games In Islam, December 29, 2009,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TOE-tGmAl18> (Accessed January 10, 2010)

kingdom's religious discourse and the prosecution of those who had decreed soccer as un-Islamic. Authorities should "prosecute those involved in the publishing of these fatwas in a Sharia court for the crime they have committed," Saudi mufti Sheikh Abdel Aziz Ibn Abdallah Al-Sheikh was quoted as saying.⁴⁷ Justice ministry advisor Sheikh Abdel Muhsin Al-Abikan argued that "the rules of the game and the prohibition against using terms such as foul, out, penalty kick, etc. is misguided since even the Prophet Muhammad used non-Arabic expressions in the hadith (the sayings of the Prophet), and even Allah used some non-Arabic words in His book the Koran.... There is nothing wrong with the lines, the referee, and the soccer rules. All things that come from the West but are not unique to it are permitted. Soccer has become a world sport and does not belong only to the non-believers."⁴⁸ To reinforce the message, the municipality of Mecca — Islam's holiest city — announced the construction of 60 soccer fields that would be managed by a local football club and the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY), a group that in the past was investigated for alleged links to militant Islamist groups.⁴⁹ Iranian filmmaker Maziar Bahari documented ambiguous Shiite Muslim clerical attitudes towards soccer while sharing a taxi in Tehran with a clergyman. The cleric gave his assessment of Iran's performance in an Asian Cup tournament. Asked about his fundamental view of soccer, the cleric scowled and said "it's a waste of time." He explained his following of the Asian Cup as relaxation in between his religious studies.⁵⁰ His attitude was rooted in religious opposition to attempts to promote soccer by Iranian ruler Reza Shah starting in 1940. Religious leaders at the time denounced the game as evidence of moral corruption of the Pahlavi regime.⁵¹ Similarly, the Islamic republic, following the 1979 overthrow of Reza Shah's son, waged an initial campaign against soccer. It viewed the game as a "royalist tool of manipulation,"⁵² a violation of Islamic values and law, a diversion from more pressing political issues and a threat because it involved the gathering of large numbers of people.

The vision of more nuanced scholars like Salman, let alone the views of mainstream scholars and officials, had little impact on Al Shabaab, jihadist rebels in northern Mali, the Taliban, Boko Haram or the Islamic State. Al Shabaab banned the game in large chunks of war-ravaged Somalia that it long controlled on the grounds that it distracted the faithful from worshipping Allah, competed with the militants for recruits and lent credence to national borders at the expense of pan-Islamist aspirations for the return of the Caliph who would rule the world's 1.5 billion Muslims as one. It also celebrated peaceful competition and undermined the narrative of an inevitable clash of civilisations between Islam and the West. Pakistani journalist Muhammed Wasim recalled the arrest of a Pakistani soccer team by the Taliban during a visit to Kandahar because they were wearing shorts. As punishment, the players had their heads shaven before being sent home. "They were arrested because they violated

⁴⁷ Majid al-Bassam, حقائق جديد تكشف عننا لافقوى وتحذيرات من لانسباق وراع لاملقق منحا, Al Watan, August 26 2005

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Al Arabiya, Mecca mayor announces launch of 60 football fields, May 13, 2013, <http://global.factiva.com/ga/default.aspx> (Accessed May, 2013)

⁵⁰ Maziar Bahari, *Football, Iranian Style*, (Tehran: Off-Centre Productions, 2001)

⁵¹ H. E. Chehabi, *The Politics of Football in Iran, Soccer and Society*, 7(2-3) (2006), 233-61

⁵² Babak Fozzoni, *Religion, politics and class: Conflict and contestation in the development of football in Iran, Soccer and Society*, 5(3) (2004), 356-70

the Islamic dress code, which forbids exposing any parts of the body,” Wasim quoted Taliban spokesman Maulvi Hameed Akhund as saying.⁵³

A high stakes game of cat-and-mouse

The risks of playing soccer were far greater in Somalia, but so were the opportunities.

Mahad Mohamed was 11 when he joined an Islamist militia. By the time he realised that doing a jihadist warlord’s bidding to give meaning to his life in a country savaged for two decades by civic strife and brutal militias wasn’t what he expected, he was three years further. After escaping from the Shabaab in 2010, he dreamt of being a soccer coach, a pilot and a computer teacher, and plays defence on his country’s under-17 national soccer team.

“People were afraid of me when I had an AK-47; now they love and congratulate me. I thank the football federation, they helped me,” he said.⁵⁴ “I just drifted into being a soldier; it is hard to say how it happened. Some friends of mine ended up being fighters and they used to tell me that it was a good and exciting life and much better than doing nothing or being on the streets. After I spent some time doing that, I understood that it wasn’t like that at all and I was happy to get out.”

The opportunity to leave the militia presented itself after three years of fighting government troops, rival jihadists and warlords, and African Union peacekeepers when the warlord he served as a bodyguard for was killed. Mahad ran away and returned home to play soccer in an open field. A Somali soccer association scout spotted him and offered him a chance to play on its youth team.

Mahad’s shift from boy killer to soccer star stood out in Somalia, a football-crazy country that straddles Africa’s strategic Gulf of Aden along which Al Shabaab had at the time draconically imposed an austere lifestyle. Supporters of a fiercely austere interpretation of Islam that made puritan Saudi Arabia seem liberal, they banned soccer as satanic and un-Islamic while Mahad was still a fighter. At the time, the Al Shabaab was on the ascendancy. The then U.S.-backed head of Somalia’s transitional government, Sheik Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, was hanging on to power by the skin of his teeth. The jihadists had reduced his authority to a few blocks around his embattled presidential palace in the crumbling, battle-scarred capital of Mogadishu. Supported by African Union and Kenyan troops, Somali forces have since regained control of much of the country with the jihadists declaring a tactical retreat.

Like the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Al Shabaab was a product of a failed foreign invasion that did little but exacerbate Somalia’s political, social and tribal fault lines. U.S.-backed Ethiopian forces crossed the Somali border in 2006 and ousted the hard-line Islamic Courts Union barely six months after the militia had driven the warlords out of Mogadishu on the eve of the 2006 World Cup in a bid to restore

⁵³ Muhammad Wasim, ‘Dreams and Nightmares, Perils of Sports Terrorism,’ (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 2003), 48

⁵⁴ Interview with the author November 15, 2010

law and order. One of the militia's first decrees was to ban the watching of World Cup matches. Much like the U.S. effort a decade earlier, as recounted in Ridley Scott's war movie *Black Hawk Down*, the Ethiopian invasion and toppling of the Islamists sparked the emergence of even more radical forces and a cycle of ever more vicious violence. Tens of thousands of people have been killed since the invasion; another 1.8 million fled their homes to become refugees.

Mahad exemplified the serious challenge soccer posed to the jihadists' dire worldview. The scout who discovered him was on no ordinary recruitment drive. His slogan was 'Put down the gun, pick up the ball.' He was part of a Somali Football Association (SFA) campaign, backed by world soccer body FIFA and local businessmen, aimed to throw down a gauntlet for the jihadists by luring child soldiers like Mahad away from them. "However difficult our situation is, we believe football can play a major role in helping peace and stability prevail in our country, and that is what our federation has long been striving to attain. Football is here to stay, not only as game to be played but as a catalyst for peace and harmony in society," said Shafi'i Moyhaddin, one of the driving forces behind the campaign.⁵⁵

Mahad was one of hundreds the association assisted in swapping jihad for soccer, the only institution that competed with radical Islam in offering young Somalis the prospect of a better life. "If we keep the young generation for football, al-Shabaab can't recruit them to fight. This is really why al-Shabaab fights with us," said Somali soccer association head Abdulghani Sayeed.⁵⁶ To shield himself from threats by Al Shabaab, Somalia's dominant jihadist militia, Sayeed lived in and operated from a heavily guarded Mogadishu hotel. Yet, he refused to move the association's headquarters out of Mogadishu's Al-Shabaab-controlled Suuqa Bakaaraha to avoid giving the jihadists a further excuse to attack its members. An open air market in the heart of the city, Suuqa Bakaaraha was famous for its trade in arms and falsified documents, and as the crash site of one of two downed U.S. Black Hawk helicopters in the 1993 Battle for Mogadishu. Shoppers fired weapons into the air to test them in one part of the market dubbed "Sky Shooter". A short distance away, they tested anti-aircraft guns and mortars. Somalis rank as one of the world's most heavily armed populations. Aid agencies estimated that two-thirds of Mogadishu's 1.5 million inhabitants own an assault rifle.⁵⁷

Middle Eastern and North African soccer fans insist that their sport is more than a game; it's a matter of life and death. From Mahad and Sayeed's perspective, that was no exaggeration. Nowhere did enthusiasm for the beautiful game involve a greater act of courage and defiance than in their native Somalia under the Shabaab where the sport had developed its own unique thrill — a high stakes game of cat and mouse between enthusiasts and jihadists. It was a struggle for a trophy grander than the world's largest sports event, the FIFA World Cup — the trophy of the future of a country and perhaps even a region. It was the world most important football match: Soccer versus Jihad.

⁵⁵ Interview with the author, November 12, 2010

⁵⁶ Interview with the author, November 15, 2010

⁵⁷ International Federation of the World Cross, World Disaster Report 2010, <https://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/disasters/WDR/WDR2010-full.pdf>

Somalia was the pitch and battle-hardened kids like Mahad were the ball. Players and enthusiasts risked execution, arrest and torture. Militants in their trademark green jumpsuits and chequered scarves drove through towns in southern Somalia in Toyota pickup trucks mounted with megaphones. Families were threatened with punishment if their children failed to enlist as fighters. Boys were plucked from makeshift soccer fields. Childless families were ordered to pay al-Shabaab US\$50 a month, the equivalent of Somalia's monthly per capita income. Local soccer club owners were detained and tortured on charges of misguiding youth. "I don't go anywhere. I just stay at home with my family so that the Shabaab don't catch me," said Mahad who ran a double risk as a teenager and a deserter.⁵⁸

Sheikh Mohamed Abdi Aros, a militant cleric who doubled as head of operations of Hizbul Islam — a jihadist group that merged with Al Shabaab in 2010 — condemned soccer as “a waste of money and time” and “an inheritance from the primitive infidels.”⁵⁹ His campaign reached a crescendo every four years during the World Cup — a moment when most of the world is glued to the television and much of Somalia risks public flogging and execution to catch a glimpse of the game. Somalia had the sad distinction of being the only country where the world's most popular game was a clandestine, life-threatening activity. To Sheikh Mohammed whose warlords once were soccer's most powerful supporters and providers of security, the World Cup was the equivalent of Karl Marx's opium for the masses. In his mind, soccer diverted the Muslim faithful from jihad; the World Cup offered the youth a stark reminder that watching games and waging battles on the pitch is a lot more fun than the austere life of a fighter who defies death in street battles.

To mark the kick-off of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, Sheikh Mohammed cautioned "all Somali youth not to dare watch these World Cup matches... They will not benefit anything or get any experience by watching semi-nude madmen jumping up and down and chasing an inflated object... we can never accept people to watch it."⁶⁰ During the match between Germany and Australia, Sheikh Mohammed's fighters raided a private home in the town of Afgoye, twenty kilometres south of Mogadishu. Of the tens of fans cluttered around one of the country's relatively few satellite TVs with one eye on the game with the volume turned off to avoid drawing attention and the other on the door in case of a raid, two were killed and 30 detained among whom were 14 teenagers. In the village of Suqa Holaha north of Mogadishu, another cleric, Sheik Abu Yahya Al Iraqi, warned a crowd that "soccer descended from the old Christian cultures and our Islamic administration will never allow watching what they call the FIFA World Cup. We are sending our last warning to the people," he said hours before a match between Nigeria and Argentina.⁶¹

Soccer allowed Mahad to forget the tragedies that dominate life beyond the pitch. He took pride in flying the Somali flag at international matches and showing the world that there is more to his country

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Interview with the author

⁵⁹ BBC News, Somali militants threaten World Cup TV viewers, June 14, 2010, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10307512>

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* BBC News

⁶¹ Kunle Solja and Gbolahan Dada, 'Islamists murder football fans for watching World Cup,' Free Republic, June 14, 2010, <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-bloggers/2537585/posts> (Accessed June 14, 2010)

than wild-eyed fanatics, suicide bombers and pirates. Yet, his transition from child soldier to national star wasn't easy. "I lost everything when I was a fighter, I had nothing," he said.⁶² Soccer training for Mahad and his fighter-turned-player team mates involved far more than just gearing up for the next match. Psychologists helped him transit back to a semblance of normal life in a country that is stumbling from bad to worse.⁶³

They were aided by the fact that the soccer association constituted an island of relative normalcy. Buoyed by its success in wrenching child fighters from the clutches of the Islamists, the association upped the stakes in its battle with the militias. In the spring of 2010, it revived the country's football championship for the first time in three years at a ceremony on the well-protected grounds of the Somali police academy in Mogadishu. It also launched a tournament for primary and secondary school students.⁶⁴

The jihadists were quick to respond to the association's challenge. "If we kill you, we will get closer to God," they said in an email sent to the association. Several days later, they sent a second mail. "This is the last warning for you to take the path of Islam. If you don't, you have no choice but to die. Do you think the non-believer police can guarantee your security?"⁶⁵

The Shabaab have since been driven out of Somali cities. Soccer is one barometer of the success of the drive to defeat them. Their reduced influence was evident in the fact that for the first time in more than two decades, matches have been played in recent years at night, teams travel in relative safety within the country and war-ravaged sports facilities, including Mogadishu's national stadium which was once one of East Africa's most impressive stadiums filled with 70,000 passionate fans during games but that was used by the Al Shabaab as an arms depot and training facility, were being refurbished. Scores cheered Somalia's Under-17 national team after it defeated Sudan in September 2012 in an African youth championship, playing without its goalkeeper, Abdulkader Dheer Hussein, who was assassinated in April of that year as part of an Al Shabaab assassination campaign that increasingly targeted not only athletes and officials but also sports journalists.⁶⁶

The campaign, like more recent attacks on a shopping mall and a university in Kenya, illustrated that Al Shabaab may be down and out but not entirely defeated. Al Shabaab has adjusted to a new reality by shifting gears to focus on hit-and-run guerrilla tactics. Al Shabaab's targets have in recent years included senior government officials as well as players like Hussein, Under-20 international player Abdi Salaam Mohamed Ali, former Somali Olympic Committee vice-president Abdulkader Yahye

⁶² *Ibid.* Interview with the author

⁶³ James M. Dorsey, Soccer Wars: The Battle for the Future of Somalia's Children, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, March 11, 2011, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.sg/2011/03/soccer-wars-battle-for-future-of.html>

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Dorsey

⁶⁵ Sudarsan Raghavan, In Somalia, soccer can be deadly under the watch of Islamic militia, The Seattle Times, July 12, 2010, <http://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/in-somalia-soccer-can-be-deadly-under-the-watch-of-islamic-militia/>

⁶⁶ James M. Dorsey, Soccer: A barometer of Al Shabab's retreat in Somalia, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer, October 5, 2012, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.sg/2012/10/soccer-barometer-of-al-shababs-retreat.html>

Sheik Ali who was killed in July 2012 and SFA president Said Mohamed Nur, who spearheaded the campaign to win back child soldiers and was murdered in April 2012.⁶⁷ Increasingly, its targets now include sports journalists who glorify “satanic” games.⁶⁸

Fourteen sports journalists were killed in the first nine months of 2012 alone, including Abdirahman Mohamed Ali whose decapitated body was dumped next to a restaurant a day after he was kidnapped; Hassan Yusuf Absuge shot that same day by masked gunmen as he returned home from work; and Mahmoud Ali Buneyste killed in August while filming a soccer match in Mogadishu hours after he attended the funeral of a murdered colleague Yusuf Ali Osman. Al Shabaab claimed responsibility for their deaths with a leader of the militants telling a Somali radio station that “God is great. We have killed spy journalists. They were the real enemies of Islam.” Their demise, he said, constituted “one of the victories that Islam gained and such operations will continue.”⁶⁹ Despite such statements, the facts in lawless Somalia remained murky and it was not impossible that they may have been victims of personal feuds or rogue armed groups. Irrespective of who was responsible for the killing of journalists, Al Shabaab’s ability to target senior political and soccer officials demonstrated its continued ability to strike and the importance of soccer in its effort to impose its moral and social code, if not by territorial control then by a campaign of fear and terror.

By contrast, Al Shabaab mentor and Taliban ally, Bin Laden, like various other leaders of militant Islamist political movements, worshiped the game as only second to Allah. So did many of their subordinates. “The day (Egyptian President Anwar) Sadat was killed in (1981) was one of the happiest of my life along with the day when Ahli football club — fielding only youth players and substitutes — beat Zamalek’s first team by three to two,” recalled Khaled al-Berry, a teenage member of a militant Egyptian Islamist group who went on to study medicine and become a London-based writer, in his autobiography.⁷⁰ These men recognised soccer’s useful bonding and recruitment qualities.⁷¹ It brought recruits into the fold, encouraged camaraderie and reinforced militancy among those who have already joined.

The perfect game

Soccer fans, like jihadists, live in a world characterised best by U.S. President George W. Bush’s us-against-them response to 9/11: “You are either with us or against us.” The track record of soccer-players-turned suicide bombers proved this point. “I had full confidence in those who were ready to take up the challenge, those who were capable with their honesty, their self-sacrifice, and their faith.

⁶⁷ Shafi’i Mohyaddin Abokar, Somali Youths Remember Slain Sports Officials, News Blaze, March 26, 2013, <http://newsblaze.com/story/20130326050635shaf.nb/topstory.html>, (Accessed March 26, 2013)

⁶⁸ Rosie DiManno, Al-Shabaab is executing Somali journalists for the crime of reporting on sports, The Star, October 4, 2012, https://www.thestar.com/sports/2012/10/04/alshabaab_is_executing_somali_journalists_for_the_crime_of_reporting_on_sports.html

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, DiManno

⁷⁰ Khaled al-Berry, ‘Life is more beautiful than Paradise: A Jihadist’s story, (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 1999), Kindle edition

⁷¹ Scott Atran, Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists, (New York: Ecco, 2010), Kindle edition

They were the ones whom I played soccer with and prayed with, and at whose hands I studied. They were the ones who, when I was in their midst, made me feel safe and protected, the one, who should I fail to show up, would ask about me as though my mere absence was an event of significance," said former jihadist Khaled Al-Berry referring to his older jihadi peers.⁷²

Soccer was perfect for the creation and sustenance of strong and cohesive jihadist groups. It facilitated personal contact and the expansion of informal networks which, in turn, encouraged individual participation and mobilisation of resources. These informal individual connections contributed to jihadist activity in a variety of ways. First, they facilitated the circulation of information which sped up decision making. In the absence of any formal coordination among jihadi organisations, the process of recruitment, enlistment and cooperation focussed on individuals. Another important function of multiple informal individual relationships was their contribution to the growth of feelings of mutual trust, said Indonesian security consultant Noor Huda Ismail. "Recruitment into most jihadi groups is not like recruitment into the police or army or college. Indeed, previous formal or informal membership in action-oriented groups such as soccer or cricket teams, and other informal ties, may facilitate the passage from radicalisation into jihad and on to joining suicide attack teams," he said.⁷³

Nonetheless, to Bin Laden as well as the more mainstream, non-violent, ultra-conservative Muslims, the beautiful game also posed a challenge. In a swath of land stretching from Central Asia to the Atlantic coast of Africa, soccer was the only institution that rivalled Islam in creating public spaces to vent pent-up anger and frustration. During the 2010 World Cup in South Africa, Saudi Arabia's religious guardians, afraid that believers would forget their daily prayers during matches broadcasted live on Saudi TV, rolled out mobile mosques on trucks and prayer mats in front of popular cafes where men gathered to watch the games.⁷⁴

Much like with Arab autocrats, soccer posed both an opportunity and a challenge to religious conservatives. The emergence of soccer clubs in Palestinian villages and towns in Israel, for example, challenged traditional social structures.⁷⁵ They competed with the sway of conservative Muslim clergymen who saw the clubs as dangerous attempts at modernisation and innovation. In a bid to co-opt soccer, Israel's Islamic Movement created a league of its own that operated independent of Israel's governing soccer body, the Israel Football Association (IFA).

Underlying the debate about soccer is a fundamental view among more conservative and militant Islamists — fun that is not exclusively but often associated with sports is a potential threat to political and social control. Witness restrictive sports policies adopted by Saudi Arabia, Iran, the Taliban, Al

⁷² *Ibid.*, Al-Berry

⁷³ Asian Football Business Review, Football's role as a "recruitment tool for terrorism," June 6, 2006, <http://footballdynamicsasia.blogspot.sg/2006/06/footballs-role-as-recruitment-tool-for.html>

⁷⁴ James M. Dorsey, Dismal Saudi Performance in Asian Cup Sparks Debate, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, January 21, 2011, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2011/01/dismal-saudi-performance-in-asian-cup.html>

⁷⁵ Amir Ben Porat, Cui Bono? Arabs, Football and State, *Soccer and Society*, *International Journal of History of Sport* (2014), 1-16

Shabaab, and some Salafis in Egypt. Youth are often the main targets because of their sheer number and disruptive potential that in the words of sociologist Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera means that “youth habitus is characterized by a greater tendency for experimentation, adventurism, idealism, drive for autonomy, mobility, and change.”⁷⁶ Bayat noted separately that “whereas the elderly poor can afford simple, traditional, and contained diversions, the globalised and affluent youth tend to embrace more spontaneous, erotically charged, and commodified pleasures. This might help explain why globalising youngsters more than others cause fear and fury among Islamist (and non-Islamist) anti-fun adversaries, especially when much of what these youths practice is informed by Western technologies of fun and is framed in terms of Western cultural import... In other words, at stake is not necessarily the disruption of the moral order, as often claimed, but rather the undermining of the hegemony, the regime of power on which certain strands of moral and political authority rest... The adversaries’ fear of fun, I conclude, revolves ultimately around the fear of exit from the paradigm that frames their mastery; it is about anxiety over loss of their ‘paradigm power.’”⁷⁷

That principle was at times extended beyond the realm of nations or territories under Islamist rule. Crowned former Egyptian national coach Hassan Shehata maintained an unwritten rule in the first decade of the 21st century that allowed only practicing Muslims to join the Egyptian national soccer team. Players prayed before games for God’s intervention and offered prayers thanking for goals and victories. To join the team, players had to pass a religious litmus test — “pious behaviour” alongside soccer skills was a primary criterion for making the team. “Without it, we will never select any player regardless of his potential,” said Shehata, who dumped a talented player for visiting a nightclub rather than a mosque in London. “I always strive to make sure that those who wear the Egypt jersey are on good terms with God,” Shehata said.⁷⁸

A reliable predictor

For Palestinians, locked into Gaza by Israeli and Egyptian travel restrictions in an economic siege that isolated the Strip from the outside world and helped Hamas reinforce its conservative social and political mores, soccer too constituted a rare space for relaxation and a safe outlet for pent-up emotions. That is as long as one steered clear of the Strip’s politically controlled clubs. Young Gazans who gathered in a Gaza restaurant to watch the 2010 World Cup qualifying match between Egypt and Algeria discussed the significance of soccer during halftime. “There is sense of despair and there is a mistrust in the leadership whether in the West Bank or in the Gaza Strip,” said a young spectator only weeks before soccer played its part in the Arab revolt that would rewrite the region’s political map.⁷⁹

Bin Laden and Haniyeh’s political interest in soccer stemmed from the fact that jihadists often start their journey as members of groups organised around some sort of action like soccer. The likes of

⁷⁶ Asef Bayat and Linda Herrera, *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30

⁷⁷ Asef Bayat, *Islamism and the Politics of Fun*, *Public Culture* 19:3, (2007), 433-459

⁷⁸ Osama Diab, *Egyptian Football’s Pious Turn*, *The Guardian*, , January 29.2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2010/jan/29/egypt-football-religion>

⁷⁹ Interview with the author, November 17, 2010

Nasrallah and self-declared Islamic State Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, despite targeting football, understood soccer's bonding and recruitment qualities. "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," noted University of Michigan professor Scott Atran.⁸⁰ Indeed, soccer weaves its way through the history of militant political Islam and jihadism since the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

In the 1990s, when Bin Laden based Al Qaeda in Sudan, the group had its own soccer league with two competing teams that maintained regularly scheduled practices and played weekly matches after Friday prayers.⁸¹ Back in Afghanistan during the U.S.-backed Islamist war against the Russians, the Afghan guerrillas and their foreign fellow travellers fought boredom in between battles with their own World Cup; fighters competed in soccer teams representing their countries of origin. Once the Russians withdrew and foreign jihadists returned home, soccer matches were an opportunity to stay in touch.⁸²

The perpetrators of the 2003 Madrid subway bombings played soccer together. Saudi players Tamer al-Thamali, Dayf Allah al-Harithi and Majid Sawat attended a Quran group twice a week alongside their regular soccer practice. Silently they made their way to Iraq as the Al Qaeda-led insurgency gained steam. Tamer and Dayf died as suicide bombers. Majid's father recognised his son when Iraqi television broadcasted his interrogation by authorities.⁸³

Similarly, the utility of soccer was not lost on the Islamic State. One thing the biographies of Jihadi John, the Islamic State's executioner of foreign hostages, and several of his European associates had in common was 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 becoming 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.

Jihadi John, identified as Mohammed Emwazi, 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."⁸⁴ In secondary school, Emwazi played soccer matches with five players in two teams whose

⁸⁰ James M. Dorsey, What does new Al Qaeda leader have in common with Bin Laden (besides being a killer)? Read on, Al Arabiya, May 22, 2011, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/05/22/150069.html>,

⁸¹ Steve Coll, The Bin Ladens: An Arabian Family in the American Century, (New York: Penguin Press HcC, 2011), 145-6

⁸² Michael Scheuer, Osama Bin Laden, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 110

⁸³ Fahd El-Ouali, تخنيذ فريق رياضى من لاطءف في لاءراق, Al Watan, August 22, 2005

⁸⁴ Alistair Jamieson, Jihadi John at Age 10: I'll Be Soccer Player When I Grow Up, NBC News, February 27, 2015, <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/jihadi-john-age-10-ill-be-soccer-player-when-i-n314006>

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 2011.⁸⁵

The court case which related to a control order imposed on one of the three former players — Ibrahim Magag — whose movements were legally restricted, identifies 10 to 12 men of mostly 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 U.K. as recruiters.⁸⁶

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 U.S. 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.⁸⁷

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. One of them, 28 year old Nero Seraiva, tweeted last year on 11 July, days before the execution of American journalist James Foley who was 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".⁸⁸

Fabio Pocas, the youngest of the Portuguese group at 22, 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.⁸⁹ In London, he helped amateur league U.K. Football Finder FC (UKFFFC) win several divisional competitions. The Sunday Times quoted UKFFFC football director Ewemade Orobator as

⁸⁵ Ian Cobain and Randeep Ramesh, Emwazi and the London schoolmates who became militant jihadists, *The Guardian*, February 27, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/feb/27/emwazi-and-the-london-schoolmates-who-became-militant-jihadis>

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* Cobain and Ramesh

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* Cobain and Ramesh

⁸⁸ Dipesh Gadhher and Mark Hookham, *The Sunday Times*, February 1, 2015, <http://www.thesundaytimes.co.uk/sto/news/article1513812.ece>

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Gadhher and Hookham

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 post on Facebook.⁹⁰

A popular soccer player, Abdullah Chaib, a Norwegian of Algerian descent who was killed in 2012, a month after travelling to Syria ostensibly as a humanitarian worker, was known for his jihadist views; his concern with struggles in Afghanistan, Chechnya and Syria; and his good looks and charm.⁹¹ His departure set an example for at least seven youths in Fredrikstad, a Norwegian industrial town famous for its historic defensive walls, to follow his path to Syria. In death, Chaib was an even more effective recruiter than in life when he allegedly supported the Prophet's Umma, an Oslo-based support group of the Islamic State. Eulogies and good wishes still continue to pour onto the Facebook page dedicated to Chaib's memory even after more than two years since his death.⁹² Chaib “was the central figure... Everybody loved him. He was the cool guy everyone wanted to be,” recalled Yousef Bartho Assidiq, a former Prophet's Umma activist.⁹³ A fellow soccer player said Chaib's death enhanced his status as a model. “It was contagious,” the player said, comparing Chaib's dedication to jihad to the skill of a “strong soccer player who does something good on the field and makes all the other players to do even better.”⁹⁴

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.”⁹⁵

A tough nut to crack

Men like Haniyeh and Bin Laden learnt the significance of soccer early on. They hailed from a part of the world populated by authoritarian, repressive regimes in which soccer offered a rare opportunity for the expression of pent-up anger and frustration. As a kid, Bin Laden organised soccer games in poor parts of Jeddah, his hometown. As if in anticipation of later rulings by radical Muslim clerics that ranged from condemning the game as a satanic invention of the infidels to seeking to provide it with

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* Gadher and Hookham

⁹¹ Andrew Higgins, A Norway Town and its Pipeline to Jihad in Syria, *The New York Times*, April 5, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/05/world/europe/a-norway-town-and-its-pipeline-to-jihad-in-syria.html?_r=0

⁹² Hvil i fred vår kjære, Abdullah Chaib, Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/search/str/Hvil%20i%20fred%20v%C3%A5r%20kj%C3%A6re%2C%20Abdullah%20Chaib/keywords_top

⁹³ *Ibid.* Higgins

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Higgins

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* Dorsey, What does new Al Qaeda leader have in common with Bin Laden

an Islamic gloss, Bin Laden played centre-forward wearing his headdress and long pants so as not to expose parts of his body.⁹⁶ He used the matches as a platform to preach during breaks his conservative view of Islam and rewarded co-players who correctly answered trivia questions about the Quran and the teachings of Prophet Muhammed.⁹⁷

Soccer often served as the lure militant Islamists employed to draw teenagers like Bin Laden and young men into their circle. A high school mate of Bin Laden in Jeddah recalled being attracted to an extracurricular Quran class in the school held by a Syrian instructor who promised his students that they would play soccer after learning verses of the Quran. Initially, "we'd sit down, read a few verses of the Koran, translate or discuss how it should be interpreted, and many points of view would be offered. Then he'd send us out to the field. He had the key to the goodies — the lockers where the balls and athletic equipment were kept. But it turned out that the athletic part of it was just disorganised, an add-on. There was no organised soccer. I ended up playing a lot of one-on-one soccer, which is not very much fun" the schoolmate recalled.⁹⁸

The schoolmate left the group a year later feeling trapped and bored while Bin Laden became increasingly committed to it. As the year progressed, the group went from memorising verses of the holy book to reading and discussing hadiths, the sayings of the Prophet, to listening to the instructor's increasingly mesmerising but violent stories. The story that prompted Bin Laden's schoolmate to leave the group was "about a boy who found God — exactly like us, our age. He wanted to please God and he found that his father was standing in his way. The father was pulling the rug out from under him when he went to pray," the schoolmate said.⁹⁹ The Syrian "told the story slowly, but he was referring to 'this brave boy' or 'this righteous boy' as he moved towards the story's climax. He explained that the father had a gun. He went through twenty minutes of the boy's preparation, step by step — the bullets, loading the gun, making a plan. Finally, the boy shot the father." The instructor concluded his story with the words: "Lord be praised — Islam was released in that home." The schoolmate said he watched in the years after leaving the group how Bin Laden and the others adopted the appearance of an Islamist by growing their beards, shortening the length of their trousers, wearing unironed shirts and advocating the Arab world's return to strict Islamic law.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, former Tunisian soccer player Nizar Trabelsi was an unlikely candidate for Islamic militancy given his record of petty crime and drug abuse. A one-time player for Germany's Fortuna Düsseldorf and Wuppertaler SV, Dortmund quickly dropped what it thought was a promising player when it emerged that Trabelsi had a cocaine habit and a criminal past. A seemingly integrated immigrant from North Africa, Trabelsi drifted until he was finally persuaded by Djamel Beghal, a French Algerian who was released from prison in 2011 after serving time for planning to attack the U.S. embassy in Paris, to go to Afghanistan to join a European cell. When he returned to Europe he consorted with jihadists

⁹⁶ Nasser Al-Bahri, *Guarding bin Laden: My Life in al-Qaeda*, (London: Thin Man Press, 2013), Kindle edition

⁹⁷ Peter L. Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda*, (New York: Free Press, 2011), 11

⁹⁸ Steve Coll, 'Young Osama,' *The New Yorker*, Vol. 81, Issue 40, 12 December 2005

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* Coll, Young Osama

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* Coll, Young Osama

in London and Brussels as well as the group that assassinated Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh. Convicted in 2001 of intending to attack NATO headquarters in Brussels, he said in court that a picture of a baby Palestinian girl killed in the Gaza Strip had convinced him to become a suicide bomber. "I intended to go in with the picture of the little Palestinian girl and press the detonator," he said describing the logistics of his foiled mission.¹⁰¹

Six Palestinians involved in a wave of Hamas suicide attacks in 2003 traced their routes to a mosque-sponsored soccer team in the conservative West Bank town of Hebron,¹⁰² much like members of a soccer team in southern Thailand who two years later joined a militant Islamist group seeking independence of Pattani Province that killed 112 people in a series of attacks on the police. Israeli intelligence believes Hamas saw the team as an ideal recruitment pool—a tight-knit group that shared a passion for soccer; a conservative, religious worldview and deep-seated frustration with Palestinian impotency in shaking off Israeli occupation.¹⁰³ Considered one of the best teams in the West Bank's most traditional city, they played on Fridays on a pitch made of asphalt just down the street from the jihad mosque that was located above a local grocer and a car repair shop. Green banners shuttering in the wind on its rooftop indicated the mosque's affiliation with Hamas, a city currently governed by a Hamas mayor.

"A tightly knit group that communicates face-to-face rather than on a mobile phone like this soccer team is a tough nut to crack," said Eran Lerman, a former senior Israeli intelligence official, describing the difficulty counter-terrorism forces often have in monitoring football-related jihadist groups. Israeli forces killed Abdullah Qawasmeh, the 43-year old alleged Hamas mastermind behind the soccer team, which executed their grizzly assignments.¹⁰⁴ Israeli officials said Qawasmeh, a member of Hamas' military wing — the Izzedin al-Qassem Brigade, had recruited more than a dozen players from different clubs in total.¹⁰⁵

At the time of Qawasmeh's assassination, Israel also rounded up the remaining players of the Jihad mosque team which was founded six years earlier by Muhsin Qawasmeh, another member of Hebron's most powerful clan.¹⁰⁶ Like legendary Egyptian player and trainer Hassan Shehata, Muhsin, the team's coach who doubled as a player, attributed equal importance to soccer skills and religiosity. He demanded that members of his team pray five times a day and that they wear the club's blue-and-white jerseys inscribed with its slogan: "Al-Jihad: Be Prepared for Them." Muhsin was arrested in the spring of 2002 in an Israeli sweep of Hebron aimed at breaking the uprising's backbone. He was sentenced to six months in prison. Many of his fellow inmates were supporters of Hamas. Israeli officials and relatives believe the intifada and his detention radicalised him and convinced him of the

¹⁰¹ BBC News, Al-Qaeda suspect tells of bomb plot, May 27, 2003, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2941702.stm>

¹⁰² Arnon Regular, Hebron's playing, and plotting, field, Haaretz, May 30, 2003, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/hebron-s-playing-and-plotting-field-1.89861>

¹⁰³ Interviews by the author with Israeli officials

¹⁰⁴ Amos Harel and Daniel Sobelman, PM: Qawasmeh killing was essential, Haaretz, June 23, 2003

¹⁰⁵ Interviews by the author with Israeli officials

¹⁰⁶ Newsweek, The Jihad Soccer Club, July 6, 2003, <http://www.newsweek.com/jihad-soccer-club-139565>,

virtues of martyrdom. His prison sentence was extended by three months after he allegedly attacked a prison ward.¹⁰⁷

Resistance to Israeli occupation of the West Bank became an early part of the Jihad soccer team's ethos. Players participated in the second Intifada against Israel barely two years after the team was created. Two players were killed in demonstrations by Israeli soldiers. Mohammed Yagmur, another player, became the team's first member to die in a suicide mission in 2002 when he attacked a Jewish settlement. A fourth player, Hamzi Qawasmeh, was shot to death several months later after he killed a settler and wounded three others in an attack on Kharsina, an Israeli outpost northeast of Hebron. The losses undermined the team's game but fuelled a longing for revenge among its remaining members. Barely three months after Hamzi's death, Muhsin and another Qawasmeh smuggled themselves into Kiryat Arba, just above Hebron, where they shot dead a couple sharing a Sabbath dinner and wounded three others before they were killed by Israeli soldiers. Almost simultaneously, two other players were shot dead as they tried to enter the settlement of Negohot. Two months later, Fuad Qawasmeh and fellow player Bassem al-Taquri launched separate suicide attacks in Hebron itself and in East Jerusalem.¹⁰⁸

Several years later, heavily armed members of Hamas' military wing provided security in Gaza for the 2009 Gaza Dialogue and Tolerance Cup, organised less than a year after a 19-day Israeli assault on the Strip in which more than 900 people, including three prominent Palestinian soccer players, were killed. Rather than retreating to their dressing rooms at half time, players and spectators crowded the pitch to pray.¹⁰⁹ The tournament was intended to revive Gaza's soccer league following its demise two years earlier when the Islamists seized control of the Strip — the world's most densely populated sliver of land sandwiched between Israel and Egypt — from their arch rival Al Fatah. To underscore the importance he attributed to the game, de facto Hamas Prime Minister Haniyeh handed the cup's trophy to the captain of the winning club.

Haniyeh, like Bin Laden and Nasrallah, had a soft spot for the game and understood the political benefits it offers, the organising force it possesses and the threat it poses. As a youngster, Haniyeh played defence for Al Shasta, his neighbourhood team made up of members of Hamas as well as Al Fatah. Al Shasta was also the only soccer team associated with the West Bank group, established by Yasser Arafat, that survived Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip in 2007. As a political leader, Haniyeh harnessed soccer's power. In one of its first moves after power grab, Hamas and its military wing took control of Gaza's soccer clubs. In doing so, Haniyeh was in good company. Further north, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah engineered funding for Al Ahed, one of Lebanon's most successful clubs, and sponsorship by Al Manar, its popular TV outlet. Hamas' Islamist rival, Islamic Jihad, organised in Gaza's Mediterranean Sea beaches camps for disadvantaged children who were offered a game of soccer or volleyball, swimming and a hefty dose of slanted history that portrayed the Israeli-

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.* Newsweek

¹⁰⁸ BBC News, Gunmen attack Jewish settlers, March 7, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/2831515.stm,

¹⁰⁹ James Montague, Football in the firing line: The Gaza Cup final, CNN, October 29, 2009, <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/SPORT/football/10/21/football.gaza.hammas.fatah/index.html?iref=mpstoryview>,

Palestinian dispute as a religious rather than a national conflict and Israelis as hell-bent on killing Arabs. “The purpose is to counter their anger, fear and sorrow. They play soccer and other games in the morning. In the afternoon, we discuss the need to sacrifice. We tell them how the Jews persecuted the prophets and tortured them and how they kill Arabs and Palestinians. They learn that this conflict is about religion, not land,” said one of the camps’ organisers.¹¹⁰

Conclusion

Soccer weaves its way through the history of militant political Islam and jihadism. Its action-oriented, aggressive conquering of the opponent’s half of the pitch often serves as an important bonding tool in the process of radicalisation and facilitates recruitment into militant and jihadist groups. By the same token, soccer has proven to be a divisive issue in jihadist and Salafist discourse. Understanding of soccer’s bonding and recruitment qualities by jihadist leaders from both sides of the discourse has not prevented adherents of one or the other side of the argument from contradicting their beliefs with actions that serve an immediate purpose. So Bin Laden, for example, despite being a fervent fan and promoter of soccer did not shy away from targeting big ticket games that would have created a watershed event. By the same token, the Islamic State’s Al-Baghdadi, although opposed to soccer as an infidel invention, has had no problem in employing soccer in the group’s recruitment videos. As a result, soccer has become not only part of the fibre of jihadist and Salafist debate but also an important utensil in their toolbox.

¹¹⁰ Interview with the author

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