Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw

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2016

Dorsey, J. M. (2016). Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 60(9), 1068-1085.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/83775>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764216632846>

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[<http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0002764216632846>].

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American Behavioral Scientist

1-19

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DOI: 10.1177/0002764216632846

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Abstract

Stadia have reemerged as a preferred jihadist target. The Islamic State (IS) targeted a friendly soccer match between France and Germany in its November 2015 attacks in Paris. (Martinez 2015) German police said days later that they had foiled a plot against a stadium in the German city of Hannover barely an hour before the German national team was scheduled to play. Similarly, Belgium cancelled a friendly soccer match against Spain (Ryan 2015). The list of targeted stadia is long. It dates back to an Al-Qaeda plan to strike against the 1998 World Cup and includes sporting grounds in among others Iraq and Nigeria. The targeting of stadia spotlights jihadists' often convoluted relationship to soccer. Many jihadists see soccer as an infidel invention designed to distract the faithful from fulfilling their religious obligations. Yet others are soccer fans or former, failed or disaffected players who see the sport as an effective recruitment and bonding tool. Men like Osama Bin Laden, Hamas' Ismail Haniyeh, and Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah base their advocacy of the utility of soccer on those Salafi and mainstream Islamic scholars who argue that the Prophet Mohammed advocated physical exercise to maintain a healthy body as opposed to more militant students of Islam who at best seek to rewrite the rules of the game to Islamicize it, if not outright ban the sport. Self-declared IS Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi embodies the jihadists' double-edged attitude toward soccer. A passionate player in his pre-IS days (McCant 2015) Al-Baghdadi's IS and its affiliates take credit for scores of attacks on stadia. A successful attack on a major soccer match in Europe would go a long way to achieve IS's goals of polarizing communities, exacerbating social tensions, and driving the marginalized further into the margins. In targeting the sport and stadia, jihadists focus on the world's most popular form of popular culture and the one fixture that evokes the kind of deep-seated emotion capable of rivalling passions associated with religion and sectarianism. Yet the relationship between militant Islam and soccer is one that has barely been researched by scholars in multiple disciplines, including Islamic, Middle Eastern, and sports studies. This article constitutes a first stab at trying to fill the gap.

Keywords

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Islamic State, terrorism, Jihad, soccer

A Double-Edged Sword

Soccer represents a double-edged sword for jihadists. The sport offers an attractive environment for recruitment and expressions of empathy. Stadia are ideal venues for dissent and protest. Not only do thousands attend matches, the games are broadcast live to huge national, regional, and global audiences. Yet it also constitutes a preferred target. A successful attack on a soccer match goes a long way to achieve jihadist goals of polarizing communities, exacerbating social tensions, and driving the marginalized further into the margins even if it is likely to alienate large numbers of fans. As a result, soccer poses an unresolved dilemma for jihadists, dividing groups between those that see the game's benefits and those that reject it outright and sparking contradictory attitudes among hard-core activists and fellow travelers.

The Islamic State (IS), the group that controls a swath of land in Syria and Iraq and has emerged as a transnational threat, embodies the jihadists' struggle with soccer and spotlights the pitch as a battlefield. IS's sweep through Northern Iraq in June 2015 during which it captured Mosul, the country's second largest city, was preceded by a bombing campaign in which soccer pitches figured prominently.

In response to the bombings, the Iraqi government organized the live screening in Baghdad's Al-Shaab International Stadium of the World Cup final between Germany and Argentina as a show of defiance against a group that has banned soccer in territory it controls, ordered the closure of sports facilities, and forbid the wearing of shirts with images imprinted on them, including soccer jerseys.

At the same time, the Iraqi Football Association officials organized soccer matches across areas of Iraq under government control in protest against IS's targeting of players and fans. The Iraqi Football Association focused on areas that had seen their soccer facilities, players, and fans attacked, including Diyala province, Al Nahrawan, Al Madaen, Al Zafaraniya, Al Qalaa, Kirkuk, and Al Qaim.

IS further signaled its dim view of soccer in a purported letter to world soccer governance body, FIFA, demanding that the group deprive Qatar of the right to host the 2022 World Cup. Addressing FIFA President Sepp Blatter by his formal first name, Joseph, the letter, published on a since defunct jihadist website, Alplatformmedia.com, said:

We sent you a message in 2010, when you decided or were bribed by the former emir of Qatar to have the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Now, after the establishment of the Caliphate, we declare that there will be no World Cup in Qatar since Qatar will be part of the Caliphate under the rule of the Caliph Ibrahim Bin Awad Alqarshi who doesn't allow corruption and diversion from Islam in the land of the Muslims. This is why we suggest that you decide to replace Qatar. The Islamic State has long-range scud missiles that can easily reach Qatar, as the Americans already know.

Ibrahim Bin Awad Alqarshi is the legal name of IS leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who as a student was known as a talented soccer player (Dorsey, 2014a [\[AQI\]](#)).

Nonetheless, the Great Mosque in Mosul, the major Iraqi city occupied by the IS, where Al-Baghdadi, who as a student was known as a talented soccer player, declared himself caliph in June 2015 was packed with men, many of whom were sporting soccer jerseys (personal interviews with the author, DATE [AQ2]). Similarly, an online review by *Vocativ* of jihadist and militant Islamist Facebook pages showed that many continue to be soccer fans. They rooted for Algeria during the World Cup but switched their allegiance to Brazil, Italy, England, and France once the Algerians had been knocked out of the tournament despite their condemnation of the Europeans as enemies of Islam. “Jihadis are in some ways like any other fans—they support the local favourites,” wrote Versha Sharma (2014), who conducted the review.

Straddling the Fence

The IS positioned itself with its spate of attacks and letter to FIFA squarely in the camp of those militant Islamists, jihadists, and Salafists, puritan Muslims who want to emulate life at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and his immediate successors, who oppose soccer as an infidel creation intended to distract the faithful from their religious obligations. They argue that soccer is not one of several sports mentioned in the Qur’an. In doing so, IS aligned itself with Boko Haram in Nigeria and Al Shabab, an Al-Qaeda affiliate, who both targeted venues where fans gathered to watch 2014 World Cup matches on huge television screens. The spate of attacks in 2014 emulated Al Shabab’s bombing in 2010 of two sites in the Ugandan capital of Kampala where fans had gathered to watch the World Cup final in South Africa (Cook, 2010).

In contrast to IS, Boko Haram and Al Shabab, jihadists like Osama Bin Laden and militant Islamists like Hamas’ Gaza leader, Ismail Haniyeh and Hezbollah Chief Hassan Nasrallah were ardent soccer fans and former players. As such, they encouraged the game as a halal pastime and useful recruitment and bonding tool. Yet, at times, they straddled the tension between a passion for soccer and a willingness to target fellow supporters.

In 1998, Bin Laden authorized a plan by Algerian jihadists to attack the 1998 World Cup. The Algerians pinpointed a match between England and Tunisia scheduled to be played in Marseille as well as U.S. matches against Germany, Iran, and Yugoslavia as targets (Robinson, 2014 [AQ3]). 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 (Robinson, 2014).

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 in for questioning (Journes, 1999). 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 Tanzania in the summer of 1998 in which 224 people were killed (Dubois, 2010, Kuper 2010). Similarly, purported messages by Malaysian-born, Al-Qaeda-affiliated bomb maker Noordin Mohammed Top, claimed that the bombings in 2009 of the Ritz Carlton and Marriott hotels in the Indonesian capital of Jakarta were intended to kill the visiting Manchester United team. Nine people were killed and 53 others wounded in the attacks (Arrahmah.com, 2009 [AQ4]). The bombs exploded 2 days before the team was scheduled to check into the Ritz and prompted it to cancel its visit.

Noor said in one of three online statements that

[one aim of the attacks was] to create an example for the Muslims regarding Wala' (Loyalty) and Baro' (Enmity), especially for the forthcoming visit of 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. (Fadly, 2009 [AQ5])

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 (Panja & Bright, 2004), Jerusalem's Bloomfield in 2004 (Dudkevitch, 2004), Jerusalem's Teddy Kollek Stadium in 2011 (Pfeffer, 2011), Melbourne Cricket Ground in 2005 (Hughes, 2008), and a stadium in the United States in 2010 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010). 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 (Fox News, 2010).

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. According to a video tape released by the U.S. Defense Department (2001), he said:

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.

Al-Qaeda Spokesman Suleiman Abu Ghaith, recalled in the video that

[referring to Islam's third most holy site, the Al Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, 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" Usama Bin Ladin executes an operation against America. (U.S. Defense Department, 2001)

Antisoccer jihadists are strengthened in their resolve by fatwas or religious opinions issued by one segment of the Salafist clergy opposed to any form of entertainment which they view as a threat to performance of religious duties. The

views of those clergymen are opposed by other Salafist imams who argue that the Quran encourages sports as long as it is in line with Islamic precepts.

The debate is reflected in advice rendered to believers on the official fatwa website of Saudi Arabia operated by The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta (Fatwa) that 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 that was broadcasting soccer matches 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” (The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, n.d.-a, Fatwa No. 16502). 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. (The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, n.d.-b, Fatwa No. 332)

Yet another fatwa cautioned that “attending football matches and watching them is unlawful for a person who knows that they are played for a reward, for attending such matches involves approving of them” (The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, n.d.-c, Fatwa No. 18951).

Twisted rulings of more radical Egyptian and Saudi clergy provided the theological underpinnings of the attitudes toward soccer of militant groups like the Taliban and Boko Haram, informed Al Shabab's drive to recruit soccer-playing kids in Somalia, and inspired some players to become fighters and suicide bombers in foreign lands. They also fueled 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” (Trabelsi, 2006). They dubbed the World Cup the “Prostitution Cup” because of the influx of prostitutes into Germany in advance of the games (Trabelsi, 2006).

Writing under the name Abu Haytham, one 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. (Tredman, 2006)

In a similar vein, Hamid bin Abdallah al-Ali (2006), 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.” A British pan-Islamist website advocating the creation of an IS in the United Kingdom that was banned in 2006 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 (Lappin, 2006).

A controversial 2005 ruling circulated on the Internet by anonymous militant clerics (Al Hajr, 2005) 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 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. The fatwa said:

If you . . . intend to play soccer, play to strengthen the body in order to better struggle in the way of God on high 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.

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 (Terdman, 2006), 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 Ishaaq Al Huwani (2009) 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.

With Us or Against Us

Jihadist proponents of soccer’s utility recognize the fact that fans like jihadists live in a world characterized 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 the point. 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 their turn, encouraged individual

participation and the mobilization of resources. These informal individual connections contributed to jihadist activity in a variety of ways.

They facilitated the circulation of information and therefore the speed of decision making. In the absence of any formal coordination among jihadi organizations, recruitment, enlistment, and cooperation focused 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, a consultant on the impact of religion on political violence.

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 radicalization into jihad and on to joining suicide attack teams. (Ismail, 2006)

Similarly, University of Michigan Professor Scott Atran noted 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” (Dorsey, 2011b [AQ6]). Atran’s yardstick is evident in analysis of past violent incidents. The perpetrators of the 2004 Madrid subway bombings played soccer together (Dorsey, 2015a [AQ7]) and a number of Hamas suicide bombers traced their roots to the same football club in the conservative West Bank town of Hebron (Regular, 2003).

Nonetheless to men like Bin Laden as well as more mainstream, nonviolent, ultraconservative 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 rivaled Islam with its vast network of mosques 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 broadcast 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 (Dorsey, 2011a [AQ8]).

Soccer’s value to jihadists was illustrated by the histories of various suicide bombers and foreign fighters. That was true for the biographies of Mohammed Emwazi who gained notoriety as Jihadi John, a Kuwaiti-born British national who featured in a number of IS videos in 2014 and 2015 as the executioner of British and American hostages, and his European associates. Emwazi was killed in 2015 by an American drone strike (Verkaik, 2015).

Emwazi and his associates were all passionate soccer fans and some had seen their hopes dashed 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.

Emwazi 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 years, he would be “in a football team scoring a goal” (Sawer, 2015). 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 (Cobain & Ramesh, 2015).

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 to 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 traveled to Somalia for training before returning to the United Kingdom 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 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 (Cobain & Ramesh, 2015).

Among the group’s other members was Bilal Berjawi, a British Lebanese national, who was stripped of his British citizenship, killed in a U.S. drone strike 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 2 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 (Cobain & Ramesh, 2015).

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 days before the execution of American journalist James Foley, the first of the IS’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 titled *A Message to America* (Zap, 2015).

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 U.K. Football Finder FC win several divisional competitions. *The Sunday Times* quoted U.K. Football Finder FC football director Ewemake 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 traveled to Syria where he adopted the name Abdurahman Al Andalus (Hookham & Gadher, 2015). 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 (Hookham & Gadher, 2015).

Prominent among the Portuguese was Celso Rodrigues da Costa, whose brother Edgar also is in Syria, and who is believed to have attended open training sessions for Arsenal, but failed to get selected. Da Costa, born in Portugal to parents from Guinea-Bissau adopted in Syria the name Abu Isa Andaluzi. Da Costa appeared as a masked fighter in a video in which IS demonstrated its understanding of the recruitment and propaganda value of soccer (Berman, 2014).

The video exploited the physical likeness of Da Costa to that of French international Lassana Diarra, who played for Arsenal before moving to Lokomotiv Moscow. A caption under the video posting read: “A former soccer player—Arsenal of London—who left everything for jihad.” Another text said: “He . . . played for Arsenal in London and left soccer, money and the European way of life to follow the path of Allah.”

On camera, Da Costa said:

My advice to you first of all is that we are in need of all types of help from those who can help in fighting the enemy. Welcome, come and find us and from those who think that they cannot fight they should also come and join us for example because it maybe that they can help us in something else, for example help with medicine, help financially, help with advice, help with any other qualities and any other skills they might have, and give and pass on this knowledge, and we will take whatever is beneficial and that way they will participate in jihad. (Berman, 2014)

Da Costa and his cohorts were following in the steps of a number of European players from immigrant backgrounds who radicalized. Burak Karan, an upcoming German Turkish soccer star, was killed in 2013 during a Syrian military raid on anti-Bashar al Assad rebels near the Turkish border (Olterman, 2013). Karan, who adopted the nom du guerre Abu Abdullah at-Turki, appeared to be destined for stardom, before he opted out at age 20 in favor of the Syrian struggle. He had played internationally seven times for Germany alongside soccer giants as Sami Khedira, Kevin-Prince Boateng, and Dennis Aogo.

Karan’s death by a bomb dropped by the Syrian air forces in the village of Azaz, near the Turkish border became public in an almost 7-minute YouTube video. Amid ideological justifications of jihad and pictures of him with children whose faces are unidentifiable but are believed to be his sons who together with his 23-year-old wife traveled with him to Syria as well a Kalashnikov rifle, Karan asked his mother in the video in Arabic not to bemoan his death. Speaking to German media, Karan’s brother Mustafa cast doubt on the video saying Burak struggled to speak Arabic.

A text in Arabic and German in the video cautioned

not to assume that those who died on Allah’s way are dead. No. They are alive with their Lord and being taken care of. . . . Those that listened to Allah and the Messenger (Prophet Mohammed) after they suffered a wound—for those among them who do good and are fearful of God, there will a fabulous reward. (YouTube, 2013)

Yann Nsaku, a Congolese-born convert to Islam and former Portsmouth FC youth center back, was one of 11 converts arrested in France in 2012 on suspicion of being violent jihadists who were plotting anti-Semitic attacks (Nniakate 2012). Nizar ben Abdelaziz Trabelsi, a Tunisian who played for Germany's Fortuna Düsseldorf and FC Wuppertal, was arrested and convicted in Belgium a decade ago on charges of illegal arms possession and being a member of a private militia. Trabelsi was sentenced to 10 years in prison (USA v. Nizar Trabelsi, 2006).

Similarly, 22-year Nidhal Selmi, a successful soccer player near the peak of his career, died in October 2014, a foreign fighter for IS. His death followed that of Tunisian handball goalkeeper Ahmed Yassin and Ahmed El-Darawi, a former policeman and Islamist parliamentary candidate who arranged soccer sponsorships for the Egyptian affiliate of Dubai telecommunications company Etisalat. El-Darawi, a supporter of the 2011 overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak, blew himself up in a suicide bombing in Iraq. It was not immediately clear what persuaded Selmi to give up his promising career as a player for one of Tunisia's most prestigious clubs, Etoile Sportive de Tunis, as well as Tunisia's national team. Like El-Darawi and Yassin, Selmi appears to have become disillusioned about prospects for change, appalled by the slaughter in Syria, and convinced that Sunni Muslims were under attack (Dorsey, 2014d [\[AQ97\]](#)).

Da Costa's appearance in the video juxtaposed with the execution in early 2015 of 13 boys in Raqqa, IS's Syrian capital for watching a match between Jordan and Iraq reflects the jihadists' convoluted attitude toward. The Syrian activist group, Raqqa Is Being Slaughtered Silently, reported that the boys were publicly executed by firing squad in a sports arena. Loudspeakers reportedly announced that their execution was intended as a message to those who violate the strict laws of the IS, which ordered that their bodies be left in the facility for all to see. "The bodies remained lying in the open and their parents were unable to withdraw them for fear of murder by terrorist organisation," the activists said (Abu Mohammed, 2015).

Nonetheless, illustrated by the examples of Emwazi and his mates, 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. 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 (Coll, 2004).

The Jihadist Dilemma

The jihadist dilemma posed by soccer as a recruitment and bonding tool on the one hand and a convenient target on the other was symbolized by expressions in stadia of the appeal of jihadist groups like IS that reflects more often than not domestic political grievances or a conspiratorial worldview rooted in puritan interpretations of Islam such as Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism rather than an ideological commitment to jihadism (Dorsey, 2015c [\[AQ107\]](#)). The dichotomy was evident when Turkish fans twice in late

2015 disrupted moments of silence for victims of IS attacks in Ankara and Paris. Boos and jeers were also heard during a minute's silence in Dublin at a Euro 2016 play-off between Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Long, 2015). The interruptions demonstrated the kind of intolerance bred by religiously cloaked authoritarianism in countries like Turkey and Saudi Arabia that fails to insure that all segments of society have a stake in the existing order.

The Turkish fans shouting of Allahu Akbar, God is Great, during moments of silence at the beginning of two soccer matches represented more than simple identification with the jihadist group or evidence of a substantial support base in Turkey. It signaled a shift in attitudes among some segments of Turkish society as a result of 12 years of rule by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, one of modern Turkey's most important leaders that increasingly has been infused with notions of "us" and "them." In Turkey, "them" is often Kurds, who account for up to 20% of the population. Kurds were prominent among the 102 victims in Ankara in October 2015 (Kiricsi, 2015) and an earlier IS attack in July of that year in Southeastern Turkish town of Suruc (BBC News, 2015). The Suruc attack sparked renewed hostilities between the Turkish military and the insurgent Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

The fan's provocative disrespect for innocent victims of political violence resembled tweets by conservative followers of Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia's austere interpretation of Islam described by dissident Saudi scholar Madawi Al-Rasheed (2015) as "militarized religious nationalism." On Twitter, these Saudis projected the recent downing of a Russian airliner and this month's attacks in Paris as legitimate revenge for atrocities committed by French colonial rule in Algeria and Russia in its wars in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and Syria (Al-Rasheed, 2015).

Al-Monitor Columnist Kadir Gursel (2015) said:

[Turkish fan disrespect for the victims of IS violence] reflects an alarming sense of estrangement from the victims and the communities to which they belong. This lack of empathy could well stem from the callousness of excluding "the other" [and possibly lead to one's own sense of exclusion being transformed into radical hostility expressed in violent action]. . . . The whistles and chants, which continued during the Greek national anthem, demonstrate how Turkey's political culture has changed since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002.

Supporters of Nacacililar Konyaspor, a club in the conservative Anatolian city of Konya, expressed that sense of estrangement in their justification of their disruption of the honoring of the victims during a soccer match. They published a video on their Facebook page that asserted "the moment of silence was not allowed in Konya." It described the Ankara victims who died while participating in a peace march as "peace-loving traitors" (Facebook, n.d.).

Like many incidents of expression of sympathy for jihadism or jihadist activism, the Turkish soccer manifestations are nevertheless shrouded in controversy that stems from governments in various Islamic countries viewing the militants as a force to be utilized for their own political purposes rather than a reflection of societal problems

that need to be addressed. In the case of Turkey, which has long been accused of turning a blind eye to IS in the hope that it would check the revival of Kurdish nationalism in neighboring Syria, *Cumhuriyet* newspaper reported that the youth wing of Erdogan's ruling Justice and Development Party AKP whose members had been granted free access to the stadium had instigated the booing of a moment of silence for the 130 victims of the Paris attacks at the beginning of a match in Istanbul (Cumhuriyet, 2015). Two of *Cumhuriyet's* top journalists were indicted in November 2015 on charges of espionage for disclosing that trucks belonging to the Turkish intelligence agency MIT had been used to ferry weapons to Islamist opposition groups in Syria (Bilginsoy, 2015).

Turkish American soccer blogger John Blasing (2015) said:

[the fan disrespect represented] a nationalist/Islamist undercurrent within Turkish society that has occasionally raised its head with disastrous consequences, and one that now wants to equate all Kurds and leftists with the labels "terrorists" and "traitor." It is, for lack of a better term, a dangerous latent Islamo-fascism lying just beneath the surface of Turkish society. It is the same undercurrent that expresses itself in the Turkish state's ambivalence towards ISIS [a reference to IS's former name].

The alleged government connection to the Turkish incidents like a French decision in the wake of the Paris attacks to ban fans from traveling to their team's away from home matches (Pugmire, 2015) recognizes the mobilization aspect of the sport that jihadist leaders see. French fears were grounded in a degree of alienation among segments of youth with an immigrant background that has prompted them to refuse to support the French national team in a manifestation of their sense that there is no equal place for them in French society.

French fears were also rooted in a history of immigrant soccer violence irrespective of whether the French team wins or not dating back to France's winning of the World Cup in 1998 with a team that brought together a generation of players who all had their origins outside France and was widely seen as a symbol of successful French integration of minorities. Days earlier, police in France and four other European countries had arrested 100 people of Algerian descent associated with the Groupe Islamique Arme, a militant Islamist group fighting in Algeria's civil war in the 1990s that left at least 100,000 people dead (Journes, 1999).

Eleven years later, some 12,000 youths of Algerian descent poured into Paris Champs Elysees for celebrations to celebrate Algeria's defeat of Egypt in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum rather than support France which was preparing for a crucial World Cup qualifier against Ireland (Dorsey, 2015b **[AQ11]**). The celebrations degenerated into clashes with police prompting a student to tell Andrew Hussey (2009), a scholar who has charted French–North African relations and the soccer politics of French communities of North African origin: "I can't believe it. I've never seen anything like it. It's not just about football. It has to be about something else." Hussey argued that the riots were not simply about perceived racism in France but harked back to French colonial rule that viewed Algeria as an integral part of

France but treated Algerians as second-class citizens. More recently, fans with a migrant background and police clashed last year in Paris and Marseille after Algeria beat Russia to advance to the 2014 World Cup finals in Brazil (Russia Today, 2014).

It is those kind of societal divisions that IS targeted with its attack on the Stade de France and its alleged plots in Germany. In doing so, IS was seeking to exploit a perception of prejudice, discrimination, and abandonment that stretches far beyond France and is not restricted to communities feel disenfranchised and hopeless. Ironically, that may have failed with French and other Muslims far more assertive in their condemnation of the Paris attacks than of the assault in January 2015 on French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and a Jewish supermarket.

However, mixed with the abhorrence felt by French Muslims at the carnage in Paris was a sense among many soccer fans that Muslims are being stereotyped and targeted whether at home or in countries far and near. That sense evident across Europe is reinforced by Europe's military and law enforcement-focused response to jihadism and Islamist militancy. Said a French taxi driver of Algerian descent who supports Paris Saint-Germaine:

Nothing justified what happened. These people are beasts. But France and others can't go round the world bombing countries and leaving ordinary people to pick up the pieces. It's logical that there would be a reaction. This, however, was not the way to do it. (Personal interview with the author, 2015)

The blurry lines between hard-core jihadists and soccer fans for whom IS constitutes primarily a symbol of resistance as well as the mix of rejection and a degree of empathy was also evident in a 1-minute video clip on YouTube that left little doubt about support for IS among supporters of storied Moroccan soccer club Raja Club Athletic. A video clip on the Internet showed fans of the Casablanca club that prides itself on its nationalist credentials dating back to opposition to colonial French rule and its reputation as the team of ordinary Moroccans chanting: "Daesh, Daesh," the Arabic acronym for IS and "God is Great, let's go on jihad" (MEMRI, 2014).

The clip appeared to reaffirm the IS's widespread emotional appeal to a segment of youth across the Middle East and North Africa rather than a willingness to actually become a foreign fighter in Syria or Iraq. "We have a high rate of unemployment. Young people want politicians to think about them. . . . Some of them can't understand. . . . They are too impatient," Moncef Mazrouki, the president of Tunisia, the Arab country with the largest number of Arab foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq, said in an interview with *Al Jazeera* (2014).

While Raja Athletic's management failed to respond to the video on its official website and Facebook page that has more than 3.1 million followers, supporters of the club sought to minimize the clip's significance. Writing on their Facebook page with its 118,830 likes, supporters quipped, "We are terrorists. . . . Our goal is to bomb other clubs. We do not want land or oil, we want titles," below a mock picture of IS fighters with the inscription "Raja's Volunteer Championship" (Dorsey, 2014c [\[AQ12\]](#)).

The supporters asserted elsewhere on their Facebook page that “we will not start to argue and beg people to believe that this is a sarcastic action and a joke.” Some supporters dismissed the video as a public relations stunt. They insisted that they were demanding reform not radical change. To emphasize the point, the supporters posted 2 days after the appearance of the video an image of Osama Bin Laden with the words: “Rest in Pieces Motherf*****r” (Dorsey, 2014c [AQ13]).

IS’s appeal as a symbol for Moroccan youth is rooted in the gap in perceptions of King Mohammad VI. The monarch, unlike most of the region’s rulers, neutralized antigovernment protests in 2011 by endorsing a new constitution that brought limited change but kept the country’s basic political structure in place. As a result, foreign media have described Mohammed VI as the King of Cool. Moroccans, however, have seen little change in their economic, social, and political prospects, while journalists and activists face increased repression.

Conclusion

Soccer weaves its way through the history of militant political Islam and jihadism. Its action-oriented, aggressive conquering of an opponent’s half of the pitch often serves as an important bonding tool in the process of radicalization 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 lined up on both sides of the divide has not prevented adherents to 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 IS’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 fiber of jihadist and Salafist debate but also an important utensil in their toolbox.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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