

Arab Soccer in a Jewish State

The Integrative Enclave

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“Maccabi Haifa is my flag”: Arab fans of Jewish teams

The crowd in the stadium is divided into two: enthusiastic fans of Maccabi, and supporters of the rival team. Both Jewish and Arab fans of Maccabi sit in the same bleachers. High iron gates separate them and the fans of the opposing club; two hard iron gates which create an atmosphere of common destiny, uniting those imprisoned together behind lock and key. An iron fence divides the people anew, granting them temporary definition, an open space where the Arab can for the moment fit in as if he were one of the guys. The soccer stadium is a space dealing with temporary reconstruction of identities. A temporary project that creates a temporary and provisional “we” . . .

(Ra'if Zureik, “Through Arab Eyes,” *Ha'aretz*, April 20, 1999)

The presence of Arab fans in the bleachers of Jewish teams is a highly significant phenomenon, wide in scope and long-term in duration. As mentioned in chapter 3, the Haifa teams were the first Premier League teams in which Arab players participated. With time, additional teams that included Arab players won considerable support among Arab soccer fans. For the Haifa teams, based close to Arab population centers in the north, the inclusion of an Arab star turned out to be a highly profitable financial move; thousands of fans traveled from the Arab towns and villages in the Galilee and the northern Triangle to watch the team.

Results of the nationwide survey from 2000 indicate that approximately two-thirds of Arab males between the ages of 18 and 50 consider themselves to be fans of at least one of the Premier League teams (see table 6.1). For the sake of comparison, table 6.2 presents the level of support for teams in the lower divisions; and it indicates that although support is given primarily to Arab teams, it is lower than support given to Premier League (PL) teams. It can be assumed that the support for the PL teams is underestimated, because the sampling

Table 6.1: *Do you consider yourself a fan of a team in the Premier League?*

Team	%
Maccabi Haifa	35.0
ha-Po'el Haifa	13.6
ha-Po'el Tel Aviv	10.0
Maccabi Tel Aviv	4.5
Beitar Yerushalaim	2.0
Other teams	0.9
No team	33.9
Total	100.0

Table 6.2: *Do you consider yourself a fan of a team not in the Premier League?*

Team	%
Team representing the respondent's town	26.4
Arab team from a different locality	31.5
A Jewish team	0.9
Fan of no team	43.1
Total	100.0

did not include residents of mixed cities, among them residents of Haifa and Jaffa.

About half of the supporters of the major teams (35 percent of all respondents), support Maccabi Haifa. Two additional teams enjoying relatively large support among the Arab public are ha-Po'el Haifa¹ and ha-Po'el Tel Aviv. The support for the latter team, while especially widespread in the southern Triangle, is an historic remnant of the dominant role played by the Histadrut in the Arab villages (ha-Po'el Tel Aviv was for years considered the “standard bearer” of the Histadrut). The team is also outstanding for its relatively large number of Arab stars, the first of whom was Rif'at Türk, who played in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

¹ The high support for ha-Po'el Haifa is certainly related to the fact that six months before the survey was conducted, the team won the championship (for the the first and last time) while an Arab player, Najwan Ghayeb, starred in its defense. The support for Maccabi Haifa, however, represents a more stable pattern.

In order to understand the secret of the “Jewish” teams’ attraction for the Arab citizens, I offer two explanations. First, the apolitical image of soccer and its meritocratic aura have made it a preferred path to integration into Jewish-Israeli society. Second, the great similarity between the symbolic formations of national ceremonies and the experience of fandom in the soccer stadium makes soccer fandom an alternative practice for national identification. The concept of national identity, despite its vagueness and opaqueness, is both highly desired and extremely complicated to adopt by the Arab-Palestinians in Israel.

The bleachers as integrative space

In the middle of the 1983/4 season, Maccabi Haifa hired the star of Maccabi Shafa ‘Amr, the Arab forward Zahi Armeli. At that point, Maccabi Haifa was far from the top and was not considered a realistic contender for the crown. But the addition of Armeli, who was in great form, gave Haifa tremendous impetus, which led to its first ever national championship. That season, in which an Arab player was the visible star and dominant factor in a Jewish team’s winning the national championship, has become deeply engraved in the memory of the Arab soccer fans. The identification with Armeli was translated into support for his team among Arab fans, support that continued to exist even in those years when there were no Arab players on the team’s roster.

Armeli’s excellence alone, however, could not have brought about the widespread popularity of Maccabi Haifa. Nor can the fact that Maccabi Haifa has traditionally displayed an exciting playing style that has also won it many supporters among Jews outside Haifa explain such an impressive identification with a soccer team. A combination of social, geographical, and historical circumstances have magnified Armeli’s success in Maccabi Haifa and loaded it with political meanings.

Haifa was a major Palestinian city that has been rapidly developing since the end of the nineteenth century. In 1947 it was the home of 80,000 Jews and 65,000 Arabs. During the 1948 war, the vast majority of the Arab population left the city before or during the attacks of the Zionist Haganah forces on the Arab quarters. While most of the Arab-Palestinians of Haifa became refugees, the remaining Arab population suddenly became a tiny minority of 4,000 people (Morris 2004: 186–211).

Despite this painful history, Arab–Jewish relations in Haifa have been characterized by relative tolerance and lower levels of mental separation and physical distancing in comparison with the pattern that developed in other mixed towns. It is possible to trace this relative tolerance to the

class-based cooperation during the period of the British Mandate (Lockman 1996), even though this cooperation was an integral part of the inter-communal confrontation (Bernstein 2000). The well-known pro-Zionist argument that Arabs were asked by Jews to stay in their homes in 1948 is based mostly on the only place where such a plea was documented – Haifa (Morris 2004: 200–202).

One expression of the relative mental proximity between Arabs and Jews in Haifa can be observed in their joint support for local soccer teams. Despite the claims of discrimination and the agonizing memories of 1948 that have never disappeared, the Palestinians in Haifa found it easy to imagine the city as an extra-territorial island, a place driven by different social dynamics than those in force elsewhere in the country. Therefore the support for Haifa teams presents the opportunity to praise “the tolerance of Haifa,” so different from the character of the state. The fact that Haifa teams have frequently included Arab players in their ranks adds an additional and decisive dimension.

These motifs are reflected in the following monologue of Suzanne, a Catholic-Palestinian resident of Haifa and a fan of Maccabi Haifa. When I met her in 1999 Suzanne was a lawyer in her early twenties. Pay attention to the complete separation she constructs between the Jewish-dominated state and the Jewish-dominated team:

I have never supported the national team. I always supported the opposing team. With Maccabi Haifa, I always went through fire and water till the end. With the national team – I had a problem, because in my family they have not liked the national team. My father did not like it, he was very happy when the national team conceded a goal. Even when Armeli played. For me, Zahi Armeli was Maccabi Haifa, a player of Maccabi Haifa, an Arab player. But with the national team it was different. I remember watching games of the national team with my uncles, and they were always for the team playing against Israel, and I took this for granted – Jews and Arabs – it doesn’t work out, that’s how it is. Even in soccer, that’s how it is. But Haifa, Maccabi Haifa was legitimate, as it were. I wasn’t afraid to say that I support Maccabi Haifa and that I have the flag and the song, and I encountered no opposition from my uncles, from my father, from my school-mates.

But the national team – this was unacceptable. There was a problem. When you grow up with this then it becomes a part of you. You begin to understand gradually why that is so, that even in sports this is so, it is the national team, it is the anthem, it is Israel. It is like Rana Raslan, [the Arab] Miss Israel, I have a problem with her, I have a problem with her representing Israel. Because to represent Israel is to represent all that Israel stands for, the anthem and everything . . . I want Israel to lose, it does something for me, it makes me happy. I believe that in the Palestinian–Israeli conflict, Israel won a decisive victory. The very fact that there is a state for fifty years is a victory. So every time that Israel is defeated in any area, I feel good.

[T.S.: Maccabi Haifa is not Israel?]

No. Maccabi Haifa is Maccabi Haifa. As though Maccabi Haifa became my state. I am crazy about Haifa. I truly love this city, and I also want to be involved. I want to be here as a lawyer, and to work for the municipality and everything – if I remain in this country. It appears to me that this city has the potential of becoming a city of coexistence, because the people here are really nice, at least people I know, Jews and Arabs. Haifa has become, as it were, my little state which I want to change and can influence because it is a state small in size and there are Arabs, there are Jews and you can speak your voice here. Haifa is my little state and soccer is the only place in Israel where I can sense belonging.

Suzanne's local pride is not unrelated to the discourse of the nation-state. Haifa is her "little state," and she chooses to express her Haifa-ness in a competitive arena. "Haifa nationality" is an option reserved mainly for residents of Haifa, but even outside Haifa, the city has acquired a reputation as a city which accepts Arabs graciously. Furthermore, Haifa's geographical proximity to Arab concentrations in the Galilee and the northern Triangle contribute to the Arab fans' love for their team.

Walid, a student at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was born in Umm al-Fahm. He studied in an Arab high school in Haifa, and it was there that he discovered Maccabi Haifa. His classmates took him to a Maccabi Haifa game, and the event left a deep impression upon him: "I enjoyed the atmosphere. Everyone around you is a fan of the same club. You feel a deeper identification. There is dynamism; you feel the competition in the air." Walid was captivated by the magic of the fraternity of the "green" fans and by the competition against the other fans. Furthermore, the support for Haifa is rationalized by linking support for soccer with the political character of the city:

On Maccabi Haifa there were also Arab players, and the very fact that this is Haifa, this is coexistence, if only all the . . . even in Jerusalem, even though the situation here is very difficult, if only there were a reality different from that which exists here [the interview was conducted in Jerusalem] – Arabs and Jews and so on. Even the mayor there is excellent² – always trying to help the Arab population, to advance it. For me, it's the perfect city. If the entire state would relate to the Arab population as we live in Haifa, the situation would be better.

The status of Haifa and its positive image are almost always mentioned in antithesis to other places in Israel. As we can see in the following monologue, this image is partly related to Haifa's location in the north. Ramez, an inhabitant of Sakhnin, is a young lawyer like Suzanne; I met

² Haifa's mayor at that time was 'Amram Mitzna, a former general who later became the chair of the Labor Party and its candidate for prime minister.

him a short while after his return from Italy, where he studied law. His sympathy for Haifa is based on the city's tolerant image and its geographical location. According to Ramez, these two qualities are related, and the character of the Jewish–Arab relationship is a result of Haifa's location on the map:

For me, in this country, I do not feel good with all the teams. Only Maccabi Haifa here in the north satisfies the Arab sector. Believe me, here nobody thinks about all the others. Maccabi Haifa, a few, ha-Po'el Haifa and that's it. For us all the rest – what is this? Who is this? Why? You know, there are problems of discrimination. It is impossible to ignore this. There are problems of discrimination for the Arab players who play in the national team, the way they relate to them. In Haifa you feel at home. Here everyone feels at home. But when you move south, to the center, it's not the same.

For residents of the Galilee, support for a Haifa team became an expression of northern regional patriotism. Similarly, in contrast to Jerusalem, the participation of Arab players fits in with the tolerant image of Haifa. Their emphasis upon “the northern” and “the Haifa (teams)” enables Arab fans to find common cause with Jewish citizens without confronting the issue of their problematic relations with the state.

The implied extension of Haifa's boundaries in Ramez's words is worth discussing. The interview was conducted in Sakhnin, but when he says, “In Haifa you feel at home, here all feel at home,” he blurs the municipal borders of Haifa and actually sees it as a natural continuation of the Arab population that is concentrated in the Galilee. This identification with the Haifa soccer team makes possible the expression of local northern patriotism, and places an emphasis upon the contrast between the north and south, the “real” State of Israel, the source of the policy of discrimination and deprivation.

Attendance at Premier League games is correlated with the active use of Hebrew (table 3.f, in appendix 3), i.e. with the propensity to interact with Jews in general. This datum is reflected also in conversations I held with fans of Maccabi Haifa, most of whom work or worked in the past in Jewish localities, whose off-field meetings with Jews are frequent and whose Hebrew is fluent. From these tendencies, it appears that support for the Jewish soccer team is part of a general configuration of patterns of involvement in Jewish society.³

³ There is even a correlation between attendance at Premier League games and the tendency to vote for Zionist parties in the elections, but this correlation is mediated by the variable, “active use of Hebrew,” which indicates higher involvement in the Jewish society (see tables 3.e and 3.f in appendix 3).

The affinity between soccer fandom and integrative inclinations are reflected as well in the words of Bashar, owner of a café in downtown Haifa. The pictures and decorations on the wall of his café leave no doubt as to the subject of his loyalty – the “greens” of Maccabi Haifa. Bashar’s family came to Haifa from the Christian Arab village of Bir’am, following an evacuation order “for 15 days” at the end of the 1948 war. Although the Supreme Court ruled that the residents should be allowed to return, the IDF blew up the village and destroyed it, and the state has never respected the court’s decision (Kimmerling 1977). In our café discussion Bashar revealed his memories of the painful uprooting of his family. The conversation, conducted in the presence of a few of the café’s regulars veered, at my initiative, between soccer and the political aspects of Arab–Jewish relations, with Bashar consistently trying to force a separation between the subjects:

You have to differentiate, you’re not going to a political event – you’re going to watch soccer. When I go to *Popolitika* [a major Israeli political talk show] or some other debate then I get into a discussion – everyone has his own different outlook. When we go to watch soccer it is purely for the game. How do you say, we leave the hard feelings at home . . . let’s say there aren’t any.

This is the essence of the stadium experience for many of the fans: “Come, let’s say there are no hard feelings” – the frustrations and the protest are put on hold in order to make way for “pure soccer,” he said. “You have to differentiate” between the political world outside and the neutral world which the fan intends to create within the stadium. That is to say, one has to insert wedges between various arenas in life and to guard rigorously the goals of each. This differentiation is essential to the survival of Arabs in Israel in the face of contradictory internal and external expectations.

A prevalent conception among both Jews and Arabs in Israel is that to be a “good citizen,” the Palestinian in Israel must be “apolitical” (Sa’ar 1998). Amalia Sa’ar interprets the inclination of Arab Christians in Haifa to stress their Christian identity as an attempt to create an apolitical identity; because the emphasis of Arab or Palestinian identity is considered “political,” the emphasis on identities that compete with national identity may improve the standing of the individual Arab as a “good citizen.” In this context the clearly apolitical image of soccer amply fulfills this need. Affirmation of the individual’s identity as “a fan of Maccabi Haifa” in the soccer stadium provides a safe arena of blessed “apolitical” identity.

The words of Suzanne – which follow – also show that the magic of the soccer field is tied to the possibility of marking it as an arena separate

from political reality. Support for a team opens a door for the Arab citizen to be loyal to a flag without being perceived as a traitor or extremist by one side or the other, and enables the supporters to do so without perceiving themselves as people who respect Zionist symbols. In the following interview segment, Suzanne's stadium experience is described as a microcosm of an ideal and idyllic egalitarian society. There is no "security" and there are no "searches"; soccer is depicted as isolated from the political context:

And then I was fourteen years old, and there was the Intifada, and you see on the TV children my age throwing stones at soldiers, and in school I was educated to believe that a soldier is someone good, someone who guards the country. I remember how once I asked the history teacher why there is an Intifada. I was then thirteen or fourteen years old, and he gave me an idiotic answer which I remember till this day. He told me that there is an Intifada because of disturbed Palestinian Arab children, who throw rocks at soldiers and at Israelis, at Jews, hate Jews, and the soldiers simply want to protect us, to protect this country and they hit them back, and because of this there is an Intifada. This is how I was brought up – this is the definition of Intifada.

That's why I am angry, because at that time children my age struggled for a just cause. I was simply unaware. I grew up with the feeling that every time I speak Arabic, they certainly link me with those who throw stones, and because of that they don't trust me. With soccer it's different. In soccer there are no Arabs or Jews. That's what I thought in the beginning, and even today I attend games and really enjoy myself. There is no issue of Arab–Jew, no issue of "security," they don't search you as you enter the soccer field, they don't relate to you differently. And I have the flag; I have the song of Maccabi Haifa. If they score a goal, I am very happy, I am really happy. When Maccabi Haifa won the championship, I sang, we celebrated with everyone and with love! Soccer is the only subject that I discuss with a Jew, and I have no problem talking about it. Simply an intellectual conversation, a conversation about sports, without the "Arab–Jewish" . . .

Team support and Arab-Palestinian nationalism

The apolitical image of the stadium is certainly related to the findings of the national survey which indicate a negative correlation between unmediated consumption of soccer via stadium attendance and pride in Palestinian national identity (see tables 3.b, 3.c, 3.d in appendix 3). Although this finding holds true for both local and Premier League games, the relation is stronger for those attending Premier League games.

In the survey, interviewees were presented with nine possibilities of belonging and asked to choose the three identities that most inflate their

pride. Among the respondents who chose the “Palestinian People” as their source of pride, only 15 percent attended a Premier League that season, as opposed to 23 percent among those who did not choose this identity. The greatest differences were among the “addicted” fans: among the seventeen fans who attended six or more games, only one chose the Palestinian identity as a source of pride. Furthermore, these findings are not mediated by background variables which were measured (education, level of religiosity, age, frequency of newspaper reading, level of fluency in Hebrew), and as a result it is difficult to argue that the correlations found indicate only that attendance at games is a form of class or status-group-related leisure activity of those who do not identify with the Palestinian cause. How, then, can we explain the “persistence” of this negative correlation?

Two explanations come to mind. First, the regression equation included the “active use of Hebrew” variable, but this variable does not overlap with the wide array of aspirations for integration. It may well be that people with aspirations for integration into Jewish society perceive their Palestinian identity as an obstacle to integration, and therefore they obscure it. Thus, the desire for integration is the variable responsible for differences in the frequency of game attendance and also for the tendency to refrain from demonstrating Palestinian national pride. This explanation harmonizes well with the fact that attendance at games is found to be a predictor of voting for Zionist parties in Knesset elections.

Another possible explanation is the capability of the soccer stadium to provide “a quasi-national” experience. Benedict Anderson argued that from the moment that national ideology took shape, it built up a self-generating vitality – capable of being transferred to numerous and varied social contexts – and attained causal autonomy with regard to social processes. Moreover, nationalism has reached a measure of “self-evident” status, as the national order is perceived as part of the world natural order, or, in the words of Anderson, “in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender” (Anderson 1991: 5). Even today, despite the transnational tendencies of the late twentieth century – globalization of consumption patterns, mass migration of labor, and decline in the power of the nation-state – the meta discourse of nationalism remains dominant and influential (Koopmans and Stathan 1999). Many world organizations, important sports competitions, and even many of the cable channels are built upon the foundation of the national unit. The absence of national identity is perceived as an anomaly; a man without national affiliation frequently feels like an imperfect being in this world. The “patchwork quilt” image that covers the world map still has power extending

beyond concrete political demands. The foci of belonging that we choose are still influenced in large part by this discourse.

The prevalent view among scholars who follow developments among the Palestinian citizens of Israel has been that the strengthening of familial and religious identities is an attempt to compensate for the difficulty in crystallizing a national identity under the existing political circumstances (Bishara 1999; Ghanem 1998). ‘Azmi Bishara links these processes to what he terms “latent Israelization.” In his view, the “Israelization” process is not only instrumental (see chapter 1). Therefore, argues Bishara, adoption of cultural patterns and involvement in Israeli politics are not translated into a joint national pride along with the state’s Jewish citizens. Because Palestinian identity is not consistent with the latent Israeli identity, other “non-nationalist” identities – religious or clan identities – are developed in order to satisfy the emotional need for pride and belonging.

In this sense, a soccer team may also be seen as a focus of belonging, fulfilling a similar role in resolving the dilemma of national identity. Support for a soccer team has an advantage over other foci of identification, in as much as it bears a degree of semblance to the nationalist experience. Like the ideal type of modern national identity, support for a team provides a special and binding relationship to key symbols, and is based upon an ideal of competition. In a situation in which adoption of any national identity is perceived as problematic, threatening, or loaded with inner contradictions – as in the case of the Arabs in Israel – *people will tend to seek an alternate identity which includes at least some of the characteristics of the national identity.* Soccer fandom, therefore, serves for the Palestinians in Israel as a “surrogate nationalism.”

Scholars from various theoretical paradigms who study symbols tend to identify the classic national symbols, the flag and the anthem, as collective representations of society, in the sense formulated by Emil Durkheim. Since Bellah’s article on “civic religion” (Bellah 1967), the flag (and sometimes the anthem) is viewed as the “totem” of the secular nation (Marvin and Ingle 1999), fulfilling exactly the same sociological function as does the cross for Christianity, or the statue of Buddha for Buddhism. Because of the functional similarity of the flags of national movements and nation-states to Durkheim’s Aborigine “totem,” this parallel is perceived as axiomatic in sociology.

However, national symbols hold essential characteristics, which set apart the modern form of national identity from other identities. The flag is not a simple totem but a “required totem.” Despite the difference between the flags and anthems of different nations, all nations need the

same “set” of symbols in order to prove their “nationhood.” Durkheim describes the totem as “an object from the natural world which society defines as holy” (Durkheim 1969 [1915]: 124), but there are no additional concrete demands regarding the source of this totem; it may be an animal, a vegetable, or an inanimate thing.

Nationalist symbols, however, remain standard. A nation must have a capital city, its own stamps, and above all, a flag and an anthem, which are the heart of every national ceremony. Weitman (1973) points out that the overwhelming majority of nation-states in the world conform to standard patterns of flag design. Flag and nation are so bound up with each other that color combinations are linked associatively to nations. The anthem is a poem with melody, of limited length, which marks the opening and/or end of national ceremonies. Thanks to the standardization of the flag and anthem, their centrality to the national experience is not comparable to any symbol representing a religious community, voluntary organizations, or extended family. The symbols in the Jewish or Islamic religions, such as the Torah scroll, Sabbath candles and the Qur’an, are far from being perceived as the “essence” of Judaism or Islam; whereas the flag and anthem are perceived as metonyms of the nation. The two “totem” accessories are so central to the concept of “nationhood” that it is impossible to imagine the existence of a nation without them.

From this aspect, the symbolic alignment of soccer teams is built upon the standard nationalist logic. Every team must be identified with a specific set of colors and an identifying logo. These colors and symbols are worn by the players, decorate the bleachers, and are the focus of loyalty among team supporters. The allegiance of fans is not based upon primary *social* relations. This loyalty is not awarded to the players, who change teams with high frequency, nor to the management or to the coach. Support for a soccer team also lacks the universal moral principle upon which the monotheistic faiths are based. Allegiance is to the symbol of the team, and, through it, to the imagined community of tens of thousands of devotees of the chosen team – similar to the allegiance given to the national flag. The unilinear relationship between the nations and their flags also exists in soccer. Just as a national flag represents only one country, so the players in their uniforms – living symbols – can belong to only one team. This rule is true even when speaking of players hired from the outside (as is the case with soldiers of any nationality who join the Foreign Legion which “represents” France and French nationality).

It appears that the choice of the flag for a country’s main symbol is embedded in the historical use of the flag by armies to indicate the location of their commanders in the melee of battle (Weitman 1973). In

this respect, the flag connects to another element that is distinctive of the national experience: competition, the desire to win. Even though every collective identification is established through the overt contrasting of “us” with “them,” the search for victory in tangible tests of power is most characteristic of modern national identities. Nationalistic feelings are aroused mainly through power struggles against another nation, and nations realize themselves mainly through competition and conflict with other communities (Lorenz 1966). National myths are almost always myths of war. Hence, some draw parallels between the national function fulfilled by wars and by sports competitions (Tomlinson 1994), and more specifically some scholars emphasize the similarity and the interpenetration of sports institutions and the military, sites of masculine competitiveness (Archetti 1994; Burstyn 1999).

Nir Toyb’s empathetic film, *Mondial in Shefaram* (1998), dramatically illustrates the distress of Arabs in Israel at the constant demands by the national discourse to adopt a flag and an anthem. The film, which follows fans from the Shafa ‘Amr town during the World Cup games of 1998, shows the town decorated with the Italian, Brazilian, German, and Argentine flags, and portrays the intensity of the aficionados’ identification with the different national teams. The scenes in Shafa ‘Amr are no different from those in other Arab towns; when a world soccer championship tournament takes place every four years, flags of the participating nations wave over the inhabitants’ homes – everyone with his or her own flag. When the anthems are played, the fans stand with emotion, and when a goal is scored, the air is full of fireworks and gunfire. ‘Abud Malek, a fan of Italy and protagonist in the film, explains the meaning of his deep identification with the Italian anthem in front of the camera: “The Israeli [anthem] is for the Israelis, for the Jews, for the Jewish people, and everything is at the cost of my people . . . this is the reason, or one of the reasons. I have no anthem of my own. So I feel for the Italian one.”

‘Abud Malek rationalizes his adoption of the national symbols of Italy as a replacement for the anthem of the country he cannot adopt. But the World Cup, with all its excitement, comes only once every four years; and the experience is mediated by the TV and is therefore indirect. On the other hand, soccer teams play in Israel every week, and the excitement can be experienced on the field itself. They do not represent countries, but they also have colors and songs of their own, and they are able to provide similar experiences of identity. In my conversation with her, Suzanne – admitting to being an “addicted” fan of Maccabi Haifa – told me that:

What I do like in soccer is . . . For me as a Palestinian who lives in Israel – I don’t have a flag. The Israeli flag doesn’t represent me, and neither does the Palestinian

flag. If the Palestinian state were established now I would not go to live there . . . I have much more in common with a Jewish Israeli girl of my age than with a girl from the West Bank. So I'm different. I am much more Israeli than Palestinian in the sense of the Palestinian regime, of everything there. That's why I'm saying that I simply don't have a flag. I don't have a national song . . . I have the feeling of belonging but I feel also that we got lost, that there are two different peoples – the Palestinians beyond the green line, and the Palestinians who live in Israel. I have an Israeli identity card, but I don't feel Israeli, I have a problem saying I am an Israeli – but also saying I am an Arab . . . I'm not . . . it's difficult. So this is one of the reasons that I feel I belong to the flag of Maccabi Haifa. I go to the games and I hold the flag in my arms and I don't have any problem singing Haifa's song. There I can sing – I have a song. I belong to a certain group with a certain song and a certain flag, you can shout . . . when you are in the field – you are with the flag and with the song. I'm always saying – the Norwegians, the Americans – they have the American anthem – I don't have one, I simply don't have one. The Palestinians in the West Bank have, the Israeli Jews here have. I don't!

The words of Suzanne's monologue speak for themselves. As she conveyed in our conversation, while studying law at the university, she came to realize how much she was discriminated against and deprived as an Arab in the Jewish state. Consequently, the awareness of her being a Palestinian-Arab was reinforced. Despite this, she still maintains that "I have more in common with a Jewish girl my age, much more than with a girl on the West Bank."⁴ The love of Maccabi Haifa fans for the flags and songs permits her, as an Arab citizen of the State of Israel – despite all the contradictions and tensions in this concept – to participate in a kind of nationalist experience. Her words indicate that the national order is perceived by her to be the proper and natural order, and the absence of a tangible flag with which she can identify is a void which must somehow be filled. It is important to note that Suzanne speaks not only about feelings of identity but also of the difficulty "saying I am an Israeli," "saying I am an Arab." The declarative statement, the public declaration of belonging, is a central component in the construction of an identity. The concretization of national symbols includes a concrete demand for the individual "to say" his or her belonging, to hold the flag, to sing the anthem. These pressures produce a need to find an arena in which one can express one's identification according to the same pattern.

⁴ Suzanne's statement reflects a widespread trend. In Smootha's survey (Smootha 1999) it was found that 69.8 percent of the Arabs in Israel feel that their daily life and style of living is closer to Jewish Israelis than to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Threats to the definition of the situation and strategies for coping

The construction of a soccer game as an apolitical and non-national arena requires the exclusion of all explicit signs of political stands or national identification. This neutralization is not self-evident, and it requires investment of energy. In order to reveal the mechanisms that make such constructions possible, we shall discuss two types of events that are liable to undermine the event's apolitical definition: (1) anti-Arab cries by Jewish fans of Maccabi Haifa; (2) the playing of the Israeli anthem at international games of the team.

Maccabi Haifa's audience is very heterogeneous in terms of class, ethnicity, and political inclination. Racist slurs against Arab players of rival teams are not widespread, but occasionally are heard. These cries destabilize the non-national definition that the Arab fans attempt to attribute to the arena, and create anew the national dividing lines between the fans.

Salman was born in Umm al-Faḥm. He completed his studies at grade 9, and went to work in construction. When I met him in 2000, he was 31 years old, and had been working for a year in a restaurant in the Jewish city of Ra'anana. Since adolescence, he was active in the DFPE party,⁵ and devoted much time and energy to political activity. Close to the 1999 elections, as a result of discord in the Umm al-Faḥm party headquarters, he withdrew from party activity. He claims that ever since he began to work in Ra'anana and as a consequence of many political discussions with new Jewish friends, he feels that the political positions of the Meretz⁶ party are the closest to his own.

When he was 15 years old, Maccabi Haifa won its first championship, with Zahi Armeli in its ranks. Salman attended the game with friends, and fell in love with the team. Since Maccabi Haifa's 1994 championship season (and the birth of his first son that year), he tries not to miss a single match of Maccabi Haifa, taking with him his children, dressed from head to toe in Maccabi Haifa's colors, green and white. He gave his second son, born in 1996, a Hebrew name, Eyal, after Maccabi Haifa's Jewish star of the time, Eyal Berkowitz. Salman relates an incident that aroused his ire:

⁵ The Democratic Front for Peace and Equality (DFPE) is a coalition of the Israeli Communist Party with other non-Zionist organizations. The party is formally defined as Arab-Jewish but gains the vast majority of its support from Arab citizens, and is therefore considered as an "Arab party."

⁶ In 1999 the Meretz party represented the liberal edge of the Zionist political spectrum. The party gained 5 percent of the Arab votes.

During a game with ha-Po'el Tel Aviv, when we were sitting in the bleachers, someone began to curse Salim Tu'ama [an Arab player for ha-Po'el Tel Aviv] calling him a terrorist and an Arab. I told him to shut his mouth, and I spoke to him crudely. I told him – “half of your audience is Arab – the masses of young Arabs who follow Maccabi Haifa, how dare you?!” My Jewish friends shut him up. In the end, he came over to me and said he was sorry and embraced me, and the following week he sat next to me in the stadium.

The affronts to Tu'ama bring the Jewish–Arab conflict onto the soccer field, and threaten to sabotage the apolitical existence of support for Maccabi Haifa that the Arab fans attempt to create. The strategy chosen by Salman was not externalization of his anger, but immediate mobilization of his Jewish friends to minimize as much as possible the conspicuousness of the nationalist split which is under constant threat of surfacing. The denouement of the process is no less important – positive physical contact with the brother-fan who imperiled the preferred definition (“embraced me”) and reinforcement of the fraternity with that fan at a later game.

Suzanne described a similar event that occurred in the bleachers. It may be that because of her double inferiority – an Arab among Jews, and a woman among men – she chose to contain her wrath, but this choice imposed a price:

There was one game in which I . . . I simply . . . someone called Walid Bdeir “Dirty Arab,” and he was sitting next to me in the bleachers. Although I had a problem with this, I did not react. This lit a red light for me, and I promised myself that I would react another time, I'll just say something. Perhaps also the soccer stadium is not the atmosphere to enter into such an argument. But this burns, it pains. Until today I am hurt at not having reacted.

In this instance, Suzanne chose to remain silent, because she reckoned that a reaction on her part would extract a high price. On the other hand, when passive protest is a ready option, she chooses it:

There was a game between Milan [the prestigious Italian team that visited Israel] and Haifa. I know that . . . OK, I have a problem standing when the anthem is played. I do not stand. Even at the graduation ceremony of my law studies I was the only one who did not stand. In the game with Milan, I was with my brother, and I did not stand. So my brother looked at me and did not rise . . . I remember that everyone looked at me – incidentally, this was the first time that there was the anthem and I was in the group. So I did not stand, and all the fans looked at me, you know with the chain necklaces and the . . . the really addicted fans who have no problem shouting obscenities, [those who eat] all those seeds. They looked at me, but not one said anything to me. One said – “Okay, she's probably an Italian and she's in the wrong section.”

The anthem predicament described by Suzanne illustrates one method of dealing with a not-so-simple challenge to the definition of the arena as “purely sportive,” one that is devoid of any political context related to Arab–Jewish relations. In the 1990s, Israeli teams began to play in the framework of European competitions. In addition, more friendly games were played between Israeli and European clubs. In the various European cup matches, the national anthems of the respective teams were not part of the protocol. Israeli teams, however, customarily open their games with the singing of *ha-Tikva*, the Israeli national anthem. Furthermore, probably due to the increasing television presence, the anthem is played at important league games. For Jewish supporters, the singing of the anthem provides another opportunity for the expression of national pride; for the Arab fans, it undermines the character of the territory as they have tried to define it: apolitical and non-Zionist, a space to feel common collective pride without becoming involved in the complexity of the Israel–Palestinian conflict. The fraternity of the white-and-green fans of Maccabi Haifa is in danger of disintegrating, and exceptional behavioral and cognitive strategies must be implemented in order to preserve it.

Salman remembers Maccabi Haifa’s victories in the European Cup games as the peak events from the time he began to root for the team. He, too, was forced to cope with the anthem dilemma, but here, too, he chose a more active reaction:

I do not sing the anthem, because I do not know the words . . . I know the ending – how you say, “land of Zion and Jerusalem.” So I also sing the end along with all the others, but I say – “land of peace and Jerusalem,” because I am not a Zionist. But I am for peace. I taught this to my Arab friends who support Maccabi Haifa, and this is what we sing.

The idea of amending the words of the anthem rises occasionally on the margins of the Israeli public debate and is mainly raised by Arab politicians or by post-Zionist Jews. But Salman’s strategy is not a theoretical plan. He sings his alternative anthem and teaches his companions to do so. Thus he holds the rope at both ends – “sings along with everyone,” not affecting the green-and-white brotherhood of Maccabi Haifa, but in actuality he sings a different, non-Zionist, anthem.

Cronin (1997) describes how, at national games of the Northern Irish national team, Catholic and Protestant supporters sing different anthems simultaneously. Maccabi Haifa Arab fans are not interested in using their team support to express their Palestinian national identity; they only want to dim the Zionist character of the international

games – and to strengthen support for the team in itself. Therefore, some of them keep to themselves until the irritation subsides, and some offer an alternative anthem that is a variation on the existing one. Joint singing of the anthem by Jews and Arabs, each singing their own words, is a unique phenomenon, possible only on the soccer field. It is an offspring of the tension between the effort of the Jewish fans to express national Zionist pride in the stadium, and the Arabs' attempt to transform the support itself into a substitute of nationalism, free of existing national identities.

The various dimensions of identifications of fans are at the same time the product of circumstances and a resource for maneuver and survival in a complex social reality. In their interactions with Jews, many Arab fans prefer to emphasize their identity as supporters of Maccabi or ha-Po'el Haifa and to downplay their Arab or Palestinian identity. In a certain sense, the soccer arena is a refuge from the nationalist identity. Support for this can also be found in the distribution of answers to the question from the countrywide survey: "Do you have a dream in the sphere of sports, and if so, what is it?": 59.5 percent replied in the positive; 17.5 percent of the respondents tied their dreams to the local team representing their town; and 15.8 percent to a major Jewish team. Only 1.6 percent and 0.7 percent tied their dreams to the achievements of the national teams of Israel and Palestine respectively. Like 'Abud Malek from Shafa 'Amr, 33 percent of the respondents tied their dreams to a national soccer team of another country!

Even so, the structure of the national discourse endures within the soccer discourse. The term "surrogate nationalism" which I have chosen to employ reflects my view that the support of Arab citizens for Jewish teams is not part of the passage to a post-national identity. On the contrary, it is tied to the stable and powerful discourse of nationalism, and the Arab fans are only trying to find their place within this discourse.

Support in return for equality?

One of the interesting findings of the nationwide survey is the great popularity of the Israeli national team games. Fully 22 percent of those interviewed said they watched all of the Israeli national team's ten Euro 2000 qualifying games (the games were played between September 1998 and November 1999); 43 percent said they watched at least half of the games, and 77 percent reported watching at least one game. These findings deserve a special discussion because, in contrast to Maccabi Haifa or ha-Po'el Tel Aviv games, the games of the Israeli national team are

marked by the ubiquitous presence of the national Zionist symbols which are liable to cause the Arab citizens discomfort. How does one explain the tremendous surge of interest in the Israeli national team? Can this be an attempt to penetrate a narrow opening to partake in an Israeli national symbol by the Arab citizens? Or perhaps, on the contrary, the great popularity of the team results from the Arab fans' anticipating a loss for the Israeli national team? The results of the survey and analysis of the in-depth interviews reveal that many of the Arab supporters do indeed consider the national team a symbolic entrance to and channel for integration into Jewish Israeli society. The presence of the Arab players brings them pride, and by supporting the team they also make a statement – it serves them as a certification of legitimacy when they come to demand civic equality. The contradictions and the tensions produced by their support are resolved by a variety of strategies.

The soccer national team as a national symbol

The establishment of the modern nation-state was accompanied everywhere by the creation of a “set” of symbols. Control over the consciousness of the citizenry, more than physical control over the territory, necessitated a series of symbols, without which the nation-state could not exist. With time, an array of symbols – all essential for establishing the state in the public's consciousness – crystallized. As has been stated, the flag, the anthem, the stamps, as well as human figures that serve as personification of the state (king, queen, or president), are all part of the standard set of national symbols. During the twentieth century, another symbol of national sovereignty took shape and was added to the array. Athletes competing in the international arena have been almost universally perceived as representing the nation with their bodies, enabling measurement of collective talents and abilities against those of other nations.

In most nation-states, the national soccer team won special status in this context. As Eric Hobsbawm eloquently put it: “The imagined community of millions seems more real in the form of eleven named people” (Hobsbawm 1990: 143). A nation-state without a national team is like a nation-state without a flag, and a nation-state without a flag is not a nation-state. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s led almost immediately to the swelling of many international organizations that accepted the new nations. One of the most important signs of these nations' sovereignty was their joining FIFA, the international soccer association. As a national symbol, the

national soccer team has important characteristics that set it apart from other symbols, intensifying its power as a recruiting symbol that arouses especially powerful emotions.

A national team is a symbol that may be compared to other symbols according to clear and universally recognized criteria. In earlier chapters, I discussed Ashworth's (1970) insight that sports enables individuals and groups to know themselves through a quasi-scientific comparison to others. Modern sports facilitates conducting controlled tests in which a certain social group can examine itself relative to another group. In contrast to human symbols like kingship or the presidency, the human make-up of a national sports team changes frequently and even in nation-states in which an ethnic code of citizenship is dominant (like Israel), tension between this code and the meritocratic sports ethic is often determined in favor of the sports ethic. Thus, the criteria for choosing the national squad, in most countries and in most periods, are influenced mainly by the players' professional competence and not by the degree in which they symbolize – by origin or biography – the hegemonic definition of the “nation.” Thus, sectors which are not perceived as symbolically “representative,” might actually represent the nation on the field.

If the national soccer team is a powerful national symbol, the appearance of an Arab player on the Israeli national team creates a rare phenomenon in Israeli society: the possibility, at least theoretical, of the existence of a national symbol shared by Jewish and Arab citizens of the state. All the national symbols of the state: the Star of David, the Menorah, *ha-Tikva*, are clearly Jewish symbols which exclude the non-Jewish public from the Israeli collective identity. The Israeli national team is a uniquely secular symbol, allowing identification also by the non-Jewish public. The willingness of Jewish fans to accept Arab players as their representatives, and the Arab players' decision to represent the State of Israel, are choices of belonging. For the sake of comparison, it is worthwhile recalling a famous historic event, that of Rashid Meklufi, a soccer player of Algerian origin who played on the French national team. In 1958, at the height of the Algerian rebellion, Meklufi deserted to the ranks of the FLN (the National Liberation Front which fought for the liberation of Algeria from the French occupation) at the head of a group of Algerian players from the French League, and, together with them, represented the FLN in a number of international games. Meklufi became a national hero in Algeria (Lanfranchi 1994). Such a phenomenon would seem fantastical in the reality of Arab soccer in Israel. True, there were Arab citizens of Israel, talented and influential, who left the state and joined the PLO (for example, the famous poet Mahmud

Darwish and the scholar Şabri Jiryis), but the soccer arena ties the player to the state with bonds of commitments, hopes, and aspirations which minimize the chance that a revolutionary national leader will ever come from the ranks of the ball kickers.

The Israeli national soccer team is a symbol of hope for the players and for many of the fans – the hope to be considered equals. While the Israeli collective identity is perceived to be a bipolar identity in which there is tension between the primordial “Jewish” code and the civic “Israeli” code (Kimmerling 1985), the Israeli national team is considered to be an obvious agent of creation of the second; the joint physical efforts of Jews and Arabs to overcome some “other” blurs primordial identities and creates a seemingly autonomous egalitarian arena.

The great popularity of the national team games, as reflected in the survey, raises the reasonable conjecture that most fans are not neutral, and that most of them are interested in either victory or loss for the national team. Amara and Kabaha, in their 1992 survey conducted in the Arab village of Barţ’a found a high level of enmity for the Israeli national team among the Israeli citizens of the village. They point out that the victories of the team are perceived by their interviewees to be a provocation against Arabs, especially against Arab males (Amara and Kabaha 1996: 139–140). This study, however, was conducted during the first Intifada, in a village half of which is located in West Bank territory. In the study presented here (conducted in a relatively calm period), based on a representative sampling of the Arab young men in Israel, totally different results were found. Analysis of the distribution of the answers to the question, “When the Israeli national team plays against a European national team, whom do you tend to support?” shows that support for the Israeli team is very high (table 6.3). The question was asked in relation to two situations – when there is an Arab player on the national team and when there is none. When an Arab player participated, support reached 69 percent (a degree of support which the national team may not have among an equivalent Jewish public). Even when there was no Arab player in the line-up, 49 percent of those asked replied that they support the Israeli national team.

It seems reasonable to suspect that, because of the centrality of soccer in the interviewees’ world, they consider this question to be a threatening but crucial loyalty test, and therefore many were inclined to declare their support for the national team despite their opposition to it. True, the support figures in the table may be inflated. This conjectured phenomenon may contribute to explaining the figures, but its significance should not be overrated. After all, only 13 percent of those interviewed

Table 6.3: *When the Israeli national team plays against a European national team, whom do you choose to support?*

	When an Arab player plays on the Israeli team	When no Arab plays on the Israeli team
The Israeli national team	69%	49%
The other national team	17%	27%
Neither team	14%	24%

chose “The State of Israel” as a source of pride; 88 percent of them were willing to reveal their votes in the elections, and the distribution of their answers greatly resembled the distribution of actual voting among Arabs in the 1999 elections.

The following situation illustrates the validity of the figures. I watched the Euro 2000 play-off qualifying game of Israel against Denmark in October 1999, on television in a café in the center of the Arab village Furaydis, in the company of hundreds of the village’s inhabitants who packed the café to the rafters. Israel was defeated 5:0. By the end of the first half (Denmark 2:0), it was evident that most of the audience was very disappointed. Accusations were exchanged between the fans of Maccabi Haifa and fans of ha-Po’el Haifa. The former accused the goalie, Dudu Awat (player for ha-Po’el); the latter blamed the Maccabi players on the team. In the middle of the second half, when defeat was certain, about two-thirds of the spectators left the café, expressing their disappointment at the team’s way of playing. Among other causes, they blamed the defeat on the fact that Arab players were not included in the game. Furaydis is a village located on a major transportation artery. It is isolated from other Arab towns and villages and is therefore considered too “Israeli” and does not represent the general Arab public in Israel. Despite this, the protest walk-out by the spectators clearly indicates that identification with Israeli national teams exists even beyond the sociological questionnaire.

Did soccer fans who support the national team choose sources of pride different from those fans who are against the national team? Table 3.g in appendix 3 presents a cross-tabulation of pride in several identities and attitude towards the national team. The table shows, as anticipated, that

among the minority desirous of the national team's defeat, the number of those who chose Palestinian identity was higher and the number of those choosing the Israeli identity was lower. Participation by Arab players on the team had a negligible effect on the interviewees' choices.

In addition, fans of the rival national team tended to choose male identity as a source of pride more than those supporting the Israeli national team and those indifferent.⁷ Fully 20 percent of all participants in the survey chose male identity as a source of pride, but there is a clear difference between those who oppose the Israeli national team and the other participants. The survey revealed that 28 percent and 27 percent of those who opposed the Israeli national team (with or without an Arab player, respectively) chose male identity as a source of pride compared to only 18 percent and 17 percent (respectively) who supported the national team. The negative association between support for the national team and pride in male identity suggests that fans concerned about their male identity do indeed consider the international sports encounter an opportunity for shooting down the masculinity of the Jewish male. In other words, the threat to male identity is tied in a great degree to the sense of degradation on the national level, and the two dimensions, the gender and the national, maintain mutual relationships and each shapes the other.

The fans' dilemmas

Support for the national team is evidence that for the Arab citizen an exceptional opportunity for identification with an Israeli national symbol has been opened. Of course, this identification is far from being free of problems and restraints. The appearance of the team is not isolated from the other political symbols present on the field, on the sidelines, before, during, and after the game: the blue and white colors of the uniforms, the symbol of the Menorah on the shirt, and, of course, the anthem played before the game. The Hebrew sports press (which constitutes a primary source for soccer consumption by the Arab public – see chapter 5) occasionally asks the Arab players demanding questions, sometimes brutal in their straightforwardness, regarding their attitude to the flag and anthem and to their status as Arabs representing the State of Israel. The usual response of these players, whether they are actual or potential team members, emphasizes that they are

⁷ Control for variables via logistic regression shows that these correlations are greatly mediated, but not totally, by education.

professional players and often, in order to placate the media, they also add an encouraging message regarding the state symbols, or, alternatively, declare their ignorance of the anthem's words (see the discussion below, on "strategies of ignorance").

The discourse which accompanies these newspaper interviews is intended, in my opinion, for internal Jewish needs; it is self-flattery by Israeli society which comes across as devoid of all favoritism and as providing equal opportunity. An extreme example of this may be found in an October 2000 issue of the Hebrew language newspaper *Ma'ariv*. A few days after thirteen Arab citizens of Israel were shot to death by the police, the Israeli national team played in Spain, and the presence of Walid Bdeir on the squad received special attention. The headlines in *Ma'ariv* dealing with game preparations reflected the tendency of reporters in the Hebrew media to demonstrate the integrative aspect of soccer: "Badir⁸: I have a goal, to win for all." In the article itself, the reporter, Ron Amikam, quotes the captain of the team, Tal Banin: "Walid is one of us, and he is no different from anyone else. For us to win this game, all the players have to be united." The reporter later adds: "Badir, by the way, does not understand what the entire hullabaloo is about. Yesterday, he even cynically asked: 'Tell me, why do you come with all these questions just now? You have never asked these questions before.'"⁹ Thus, the overlapping interests of the Arab player on the national team (international exposure and prestige) and the Israeli media (liberal self-image) join together to portray the national team as an integrative arena.

Even though the primary target audience of this discourse is the Jewish public, the Arab citizens, too, are exposed to the Israeli national team as presented on television and in the Hebrew press, and they, too, are forced to cope with the prominent presence of the Zionist symbols. From in-depth interviews with soccer fans, one can detect diverse strategies for coping with this unique situation. One of these strategies, mentioned in the previous section, was employed by Salman, who changed the words of the anthem. Hereby, I would like to present three additional strategies: "the strategy of

⁸ The pronunciation of Bdeir's name symbolized in a nutshell the relationship between him and the Hebrew media. The name was first distorted by some Jewish broadcasters who found it easier to pronounce it as "Badir," and then it was adopted by all the Hebrew sports media. Zuheir Bahlul, an Arab broadcaster who is dominant in the Hebrew media, alerted his Jewish colleagues to the mistake. These colleagues went to Bdeir and asked him how he prefers to be called. Bdeir answered without hesitation: "Badir" (based on my conversation with Zuheir Bahlul).

⁹ *Ma'ariv*, October 11, 2000.

ignorance,” “the strategy of differentiation,” and the separation of the player from the national team. It is important to note that there is a tactical dimension to support for the national team. Those who supported the team wanted very much that I, as a Jew, should be aware of their position. It appears that they thought that this information could raise – in my eyes – their status as citizens with equal rights in the state.

The most common strategy for coping with the contradictions between support for the national team and the Zionist character of the game ceremonials is “the strategy of ignorance.” This strategy is to be found mostly among the less educated fans, who exploit their lack of education as an alibi. Bilal, aged 45, a gardener by trade, is “King of the Fans” of Nazareth. A local joke tells that he has never seen his team scoring a goal, because his back is always to the field and his face to the audience – organizing the songs and cries of encouragement (accompanied by the “darbuka” drum held between his knees). When he described his attitude to the Israeli national team, it was fairly obvious that he hoped that his support for the team would advance his chances to win recognition as a citizen with equal rights. He tries to exploit his support for the team in order to receive my acquiescence and understanding of his demand for equal rights. The use of support of the team as a tool in the bargaining over rights intensifies the need to moderate the conflicts inherent in this support. The ignorance strategy is the simplest instrument for avoiding contradictions. In the following quote, Bilal describes the preparations in his home for the forthcoming game of the national team:

We are Israelis, sweetie. We are Israelis, this interests me – this national team is mine. I am not from Gaza. I am not from Jordan. I am Israeli. I, [Bilal] – am registered as Israeli. So I am interested in everything in Israel. I am also interested in receiving my necessary sustenance like the Jews. Why? Because I am Israeli, and really, I have it coming, you understand? All pray that today the national team will win, I am telling you the truth – and Najwan [Najwan Ghrayeb, an Arab player from Nazareth on the national team] will score a goal – this first of all . . .

[Question: At the beginning of the game, the two national teams stand and sing the anthem. What does that say to you?]

Look, the truth, I am not with them there. If I see . . . if I will be at this game I will stand and I will give respect as is necessary, but if I am at home, I remain silent until they finish. Why, because even when I wanted to learn these words and this song, I don’t absorb it, it’s a little difficult. But if I, for instance in . . . I was with Najwan at the Olympic team. When they played against Lithuania and against Romania, I was once in Ashdod and once in Kiryat Eliezer [a stadium in Haifa], I stood with all the others but I don’t understand the song. That is to say, I wanted to sing but I don’t know. But I paid respect.

The presence of Najwan Ghrayeb from Nazareth enables Bilal to root for the national team without deliberation, but it is very important for him to stress that he supports the team, and therefore he deserves all rights. Ignorance shields him from the need to confront the symbolic significance of the Israeli anthem: he “doesn’t understand,” “doesn’t absorb.” The ignorance plea is especially widespread when the Hebrew media interview the Arab players of the national team, and ask them about their attitude to the anthem. They usually point out that in school they were not taught the words of the anthem, thus freeing themselves of the discomforting question.

Another strategy, used by more educated fans, is that of “conceptual separation.” Walid ‘Ayub, poet, writer, and journalist, tells of his feelings during the playing of the anthem at a game of the national team:

I am also in the audience, standing with the others. I do not identify with the anthem, but I respect it. That is to say, just as I was in France and heard the French anthem and I heard the anthem of Brazil. I respect, but I do not identify. It tells me nothing. The anthem is the anthem of the state, it is not my anthem. It does not express my feelings or my opinions.

[Question: And the national team?]

The national team represents me, sure, that’s natural. There is a difference. The Arab spectator stands during the anthem because he respects, but he does not identify, he cannot identify, with the anthem. The national anthem should express the . . . don’t forget that Israel is a Jewish state, not a state of all its citizens. A state of all its citizens would . . . but the anthem is Jewish. It is a formal statement. The national team, however, is an Israeli national team which represents all the citizens of Israel, Arabs and Jews.

‘Ayub’s words, which epitomize the concept of the “integrative enclave,” carry weight, because he is not just another fan. At the time of the interview, Walid ‘Ayub was editor of the sports section of *Faṣl al-Maqal* (organ of the National Democratic Assembly party) which voiced the Arab nationalist line more clearly and decisively than any other newspaper in Israel. His wholehearted willingness to take advantage of the rare opportunity to identify with a general Israeli symbol shows how wide is the gap between the Arab citizen’s aspiration to be an equal citizen in the Israeli public arena, and the willingness of the state and the Jewish majority to enable this. Because Arabs play on the national team, ‘Ayub is certain that the national team represents him.

There is a third popular strategy of soccer fans opposing the national team. Basically, it is a distinction drawn between the player and the team. Qasim, a 26-year-old attorney, recalls the time when Armeli and Türk

played on the national team: “When I watched the national team play, I wanted the team to lose, but when the Arab players, Armeli and Türk, were on the field, I was in a dilemma – I wanted the team to lose, but I wanted them to score and prove themselves.”

Qasim’s desire for the Jewish majority’s recognition of Arab talents is pronounced. Despite his opposition to the team as a Zionist symbol, once the Arab players have the opportunity of integrating into the team, it is important that “they prove themselves.” Amin, a Sakhnin grocer, describes a similar attitude: “When I watch Najwan Ghayeb stand for the anthem, I feel sorry for him because he has to stand to attention for something that is meaningless for him. But when he plays, I am proud that he is representing me.”

Once more we see the desire to participate in the general arena and to win recognition and representation. Amin’s words reflect a feeling prevalent among soccer fans with whom I spoke – deep identification with the Arab player on the field, despite difficulty in identifying with the team. Throughout the study – in conversations, in interviews, and in the sports press – rarely did I hear or read criticism of the players for their willingness to represent the State of Israel in the international arena. I did find protest and even anger when speaking with people who are not soccer fans – a fact that reinforces the supposition that for those who take part, the soccer arena provides hope (or illusions); this is not the lot of the uninvolved.

The participation of Arab players on the Israel national soccer team, and the attitude of Arab soccer fans to this participation reveals the distress in which many Arab citizens of Israel find themselves: the strong desire to partake in the Israeli public arena and not remain on the sidelines, as against their continued marginalization by the Jewish majority. Despite their rejection on the practical level – from government office, from the faculty of institutions of higher education – and, on the symbolic level – from the national symbols – many refuse to give up. When a narrow breach is opened, even if it has only symbolic significance – such as the Israeli national team – they exploit the opportunity to its fullest, with identification and support.

This integrative orientation of soccer has provoked as well an isolationist reaction. The main institutional expression of this reaction is the creation of the Islamic Soccer League, discussed in the next chapter.