



## *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: the Integrative Enclave*

Tamir Sorek

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*Review by*

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The national identity of Palestinian citizens of Israel is not only understudied but also frequently treated from a biased perspective, as the suspicion with which this group is sometimes viewed both by Israeli Jews and by non-Israeli Arabs has, in an unfortunate number of cases, been carried even into scholarly work. It was thus with great pleasure that I read Tamir Sorek's perceptive and finely researched *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave* (2007). Nearly every page of this work introduces a new insight about the meanings and uses of soccer in Israel, building up a nuanced and convincing picture of the difficulties faced by an ethnic minority, the workings of hegemony in a settler colonial state, the multiple valences of modernization projects, and the often contradictory ways in which differently positioned actors respond to these pressures. Most importantly, Sorek's work documents the existence of "a specific Israeli version of Palestinian nationalism" (p. 101), an identity formulation of a layered type that should be traced in a greater number of minority contexts.

Soccer is a useful point of entry into Palestinian Israeli society because it displays in microcosm the interplay among the endeavors of the Israeli state to control its Palestinian population, Palestinian attempts to construct a sense of belonging in a state where they face institutionalized racism, and the practical efforts of Palestinian individuals in different structural positions to improve their personal status and control in the context of said racism.

Soccer represents one instance in which the Israeli state has been successful in integrating and controlling its Palestinian minority. Despite the fact that soccer was reintroduced to the Palestin-



ian population by various Zionist actors after the establishment of the state, it has, in fact been enthusiastically adopted by the population. It thus appears to have achieved many of the purposes set out for it, providing an apolitical outlet for expressions of youthful machismo, absorbing time that might otherwise be devoted to oppositional politics, and even, as Sorek demonstrates, entailing a greater investment in the Israeli state among fans; interest in soccer correlates positively with voting for Zionist parties and speaking Hebrew.

The popularity of soccer can be explained in part by the uses to which it is put by various groups within Palestinian-Israeli society. The desires of Palestinian mayors for stability and loyalty within their towns dovetail with similar needs on the part of the Jewish state; for both groups, soccer presents itself as a useful distraction for young men. Correspondingly, disenfranchised young men (and women) can improve their self-images by identifying with strong Arab soccer teams and players, particularly those who are successful in a national or international context. Individuals, mayors, and tourist boards hope to raise the status of their own towns or of Palestinian citizens in Israeli society by identifying the ethnic group with soccer. While soccer can be viewed as a success story for the state, its integrative function is far from perfect.

The most successful Palestinian soccer team, Sakhnin, represents a town with unusually high levels of Palestinian and Arab pride. Arab language newspapers regularly relate soccer games between Arab and Jewish teams to iconic historical battles, and many Palestinian Israeli soccer fans root against the Israeli national team. Nevertheless, even the oppositional function of soccer is not an unqualified problem for the state. Soccer offers a necessary means for individual Palestinian Israelis to express the complexity of their feelings towards the state, and thus to attempt to satisfy their need to belong. For example, the Palestinian nationalist sports editor Walid 'Ayub roots against the Israeli national team but displays a desire for integration through his pleasure when Palestinian players on that team "prove themselves" (p.127). Similarly, Palestinian fans both of the national team and of Premier League clubs representing Jewish towns distance this support from support for the state. The "apolitical" nature of soccer allows them to construct themselves as part of an imagined community of soccer fans within their home nation without supporting its Jewish character.

Sorek's argument could have been strengthened if he had further pursued the use to which soccer might be put in intra-ethnic conflicts. Sports could be employed in factional struggles within the Palestinian



community, a fact which might serve the divide and conquer strategy of the State (mentioned on p. 151). While Sorek reports that competitions between Arab teams are particularly heated (p. 83), that the composition of teams within villages or towns often represents pre-existing divisions such as clan and class (p. 47), and that tensions between such groups can be expressed through soccer team identification (p. 160), he does not explore the implications of these points for the hegemonic role of soccer. Even his chapter about the Islamic league is absent a discussion of the Islamic/secular rift in Palestinian Israeli society. That chapter, based on textual analysis of newspaper accounts (a method which produced lively results in Sorek's discussion of Palestinian nationalist uses of soccer), would have been much improved by the addition of ethnographic interviews like those Sorek employed in other sections of the book.

Nevertheless, Sorek's book is important and thought-provoking. It is minutely researched using an impressive variety of methods including the quantitative, ethnographic, archival, textual, and sociolinguistic; further, data are considered according to theoretical approaches from Gramsci to Goffman. Above all, Sorek's fine grained analysis and subtle understanding of his field site will render this book useful to all scholars interested in Palestinian Israelis, the construction of ethnicity and national identity, and the relationship between sports and politics.



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