

The Palestinian Flag Is Back

• • • *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State Revisited*

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ABSTRACT: This article reexamines my argument published in 2007 regarding the apolitical character of Arab soccer fans in Israel. Until recently, explicit political protest and expressions of Palestinian national identity have remained outside the stadium. For most Arab fans, soccer was an opportunity to display common ground with Jewish citizens. Displaying Palestinian nationalism was considered to be endangering the potential for rapprochement. However, over the past decade the barriers that blocked political protest from entering the stadium have been ruptured. Several interrelated factors are suggested as explanations for this shift: multiple cycles of escalated violence in the region, a wave of anti-Arab legislation, the globalization of fan culture, the model of a politicized soccer fan provided during the Arab Spring, and the emergence of social media.

KEYWORDS: Arab Spring, fans, Israel, nationalism, Palestinians, soccer, social media

On 5 October 2015, Beitar Jerusalem came to play at the local stadium in Sakhnin before seven thousand spectators, more than 90 percent of them supporting the local team, Ittihad Abnaa Sakhnin. The opening of the game was no less than a Palestinian national spectacle. Fans waved Palestinian flags, and thousands of throats called simultaneously: “in blood, in spirit, we will redeem you al-Aqsa!” (the mosque in Jerusalem that has become an icon of Palestinian nationalism). In case anyone did not get the message, the following chant was even more explicit: “Falastin [Palestine in Arabic], Olé, Olé, Falastin, Olé, Olé.”¹ Earlier that same week, Palestinians in Israel commemorated the fifteenth anniversary of the October 2000 events, when Israeli police killed 12 Arab citizens. In the



streets of Sakhnin, as in Nazareth, Umm al-Fahm, and other Arab-majority towns, demonstrators marched with Palestinian flags, chanting Palestinian national slogans.

The Palestinian national spectacle in the stadium seemed to be a natural extension of the national protests in the street. Until the late 2000s, though, an invisible wedge had prevented political protest and national symbolism—and especially the Palestinian flag—from spilling over from the street to the stadium. A few years earlier, the above-mentioned scene in the stadium would have been unthinkable. What caused the change, and what does this transformation say about Arab-Jewish relations in Israel?

This article reexamines the argument I made in my 2007 book *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave* regarding the apolitical character of Arab soccer space in Israel. This argument went as follows: the Arab citizens of Israel are overrepresented in the soccer sphere as players and as fans. At the highest professional levels their achievements are far beyond their achievements in most other competitive fields of Israeli public life. For most Arab fans in Israel, soccer has been an opportunity for displaying a common ground with Jewish citizens, and this display targeted a Jewish audience. Emphasizing Palestinian nationalism or ethnically based political protest were considered endangering the potential for rapprochement and therefore were excluded from the stadium. Hebrew media tended to support the integrative interpretation, because Arab success in sports supported the image of Israel as a liberal society, without risking Jewish privileges.

Since the book was published, Arab soccer has become even stronger. Ittihad Abnaa Sakhnin has gained the status of a flagship team of Palestinians in Israel and has become an almost permanent member in the Israeli Premier League, with 12 consecutive years in it (2007–2019). The percentage of Arab players among players who are Israeli citizens in the Israeli Premier League increased from an average of 9.7 percent in the 2000s to 15.4 percent in 2011–2016, and their relative share in goals scored in the Premier League in the same periods increased from 6.5 percent to 16.7 percent, respectively.² The number of Arab players on Israel's national team increased from three in the 1990s and six in the 2000s, to ten in 2010–2017.³

While the empowerment of Arab soccer has continued its almost linear upward tendency over the past decade, in the same period there has been a gradual but explicit shift in the culture of fandom, with explicit politicization and increasing nationalism within Arab soccer stadiums in Israel. Leading this tendency are the fans of Ittihad Abnaa Sakhnin. Some of these fans bring to the stadium explicit icons of political protest, including Palestinian national flags, banners decorated with the Dome of the Rock, and slogans protesting specific government policies against Palestinian citizens.

I explain this shift as a product of the interaction of recent local and global developments. Locally, it is a reaction to a wave of anti-Arab legislation and rhetoric since the mid-2000s, several cycles of escalated violence in the region, and the general deterioration in Arab-Jewish relations inside Israel during the same period. At the same time, the Sakhnin fans are part of a globalized phenomenon of a politicized and vocal fan population referred to as 'Ultras.' The Sakhnin Ultras' political activism is inspired as well by fans' behavior in neighboring countries. Finally, the rapid growth of social media has undermined the traditional distinction in Arab soccer in Israel between politicized sport journalists and apolitical fans in the stadium.

The arguments in the article are based on sporadic visits to Sakhnin games I have made since 2007, conversations with fans, and regularly following the Arabic sport media, as well as a more systematic analysis of the content that has appeared on the Facebook page of Ultras Sakhnin between September 2014 and May 2018.

The Failure to Achieve Equality

The integration of Arab citizens of Israel into the soccer arena, as fans and as players, is a sad success story. During the period I was conducting my field study on Arab soccer in Israel (1998–2001), I became conscious of the feelings of frustration and discrimination of a colonized group and became witness to a process in which the willingness of Palestinians in Israel to continue to accept their inferior status, as individuals and as a collective, was dissipating. I watched this process take shape in the mayors' protest tent in front of the Prime Minister's office in 1999 where I spent days and nights; at the annual Land Day ceremony in Sakhnin in 2000 where I was part of a large crowd tear-gassed for no valid reason; and in hundreds of conversations and fragments of conversations with soccer fans, university students, and people on the street.

Surprisingly, at the time, this process was barely felt at the soccer games themselves. At games I attended in Sakhnin, Kafr Kana, Nazareth, and Taybeh, the fans tried, usually successfully, to preserve the atmosphere of a 'sportive' situation, and to ignore the national identity barrier that separates them from Jewish players and fans. I was aware of and witnessed how Arab fans and players excluded expressions of Palestinian nationalism and political protest from the soccer field. The ability to insert wedges between different social arenas is common among marginalized ethnic communities throughout the world, but in conditions of intense tension between contradictory expectations that derive from different

collective affiliations, this compartmentalization becomes an existential necessity. Given the willingness of Arab players and fans to use soccer as a means for integration and the readiness of the Hebrew media and state institutions to allow this integration so long as it is restricted to defined areas, I characterized Arab soccer in Israel as an 'integrative enclave': a social sphere that is ruled by a liberal-integrative discourse of citizenship in sharp contrast to the ethnic discourse that governs the Israeli public sphere in general. It is a sphere that permits a limited and well-bounded inclusion in Israeli citizenship. The integrative enclave was the combined product of the Jewish Israeli interest in the preservation of the status quo and the need of discriminated-against Palestinian citizens to maintain active protest against the status quo while simultaneously preserving decent relations with the Jewish public.

Furthermore, soccer seemed to be operating as a latent producer of political power. Soccer clubs had already been regarded by Israeli officials back in the 1960s as a counter-balance to subversive nationalist anti-colonial tendencies, and four decades later, I found that Arab men who attend soccer games were less likely to be proud of their Palestinian identity. At least in some contexts, they were also more likely to vote for Zionist parties or candidates. Fans of conspiracy theories might expect these findings but sport sociologists should not be surprised either. As neo-Marxist sports critics have long maintained, sports provide the optimistic promise of achievement while creating the illusion of the absence of structural limitations (Brohm 1978). Therefore, they frequently embody the potential for preserving the existing social order rather than challenging it.

Arabs in Israel face discrimination in matters of government budgets, employment opportunities, and prospects for development (Haider et al. 2010), while their national identity and collective memory are frequently delegitimized in the public sphere. Intense involvement in the soccer arena, however, tends to dull the feelings of discrimination. As Arab citizens' participation in the soccer arena deepened, this egalitarian image received more respect in their world and integration into Israeli society was seen as a genuinely realistic possibility.

However, Arab soccer fans have played an active role in the construction of meanings in the soccer sphere, and there is nothing deterministic about the political significance of sports. The hegemonic interpretations of soccer are constantly contested. In addition, the exclusion of political protest has never meant that the soccer field did not have a political role or that it was not influenced by political dynamics outside the stadium.

Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel have indeed attempted to leverage their success in soccer as a tool in their demands for social equality. Because soccer is ostensibly apolitical, Arab fans assumed that demanding

equality from the soccer field outward might be less threatening and more acceptable to the Jewish majority than demanding it in other contexts. In other words, the 'depoliticization' of soccer itself was part of the political game. For example, in the wake of Sakhnin's National Cup win in 2004, MK Ahmad Tibi wrote that "the message sent from the field will perhaps open doors that were slammed shut and locked in the face of Sakhnin, Umm al-Fahm, Taybeh, Rahat, and Nazareth. These victories have their own dynamic."⁴ The Arab broadcaster Zuheir Bahlul wrote in the same context and on the same day that "sports in particular overcomes historic obstacles, eradicating stereotypes and prejudices."⁵

However, the expectations of Tibi and Bahlul have not come to pass. The depoliticization of soccer did not help to open doors or eradicate prejudices, and this partly explains the recent politicization of the stadium. Indeed, by their massive support for an Arab team that won the Israel State Cup and by their desire to represent Israel on the international level, Arab soccer fans presented the Jewish Israeli public with a dramatic proposal. Their consistent endeavors to articulate their success in Israeli, even in patriotic terms, challenged the basic assumption of the hegemonic definition of Israeli identity. The Arab fans were offering an Israeliness that was not necessarily Jewish, nor Zionist. This Israeliness, by contrast, is bilingual, speaking both Arabic and Hebrew, and vibrantly switching between or integrating the two. It is secular in its institutional form but tolerant of any religion, and can even tolerate Muslim prayer in the national sphere, like the collective prayer of Sakhnin's Muslim players right after their victory. It is based on active participation in the Israeli arena and on dialogue between the various ethnic and religious groups within it.

The articulation of this Israeliness, however, has remained on the margins. Despite the aspirations of Arab soccer players and fans, and despite the premature optimism apparent in the remarks of politicians and journalists following Sakhnin's victory, there is no evidence yet that integration in the sphere of soccer contributes to the acceptance of Arabs by the Jewish Israelis as citizens with equal rights.

The events of October 2000 did not have an immediate impact on the integrative role assigned to soccer by Arab fans. Sakhnin's first game of that season was delayed for seven weeks, and when the games were finally rescheduled, bouquets of flowers awaited the first Jewish guest team, Hapoel Be'er Sheva. The pain and rage had not yet subsided but, at least in the short term, the collective effort of Sakhnin residents to use soccer as an arena for easing relations had not diminished after the traumatic events.

The incubation process took several years, and was fueled as well by four years of intifada in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the 2006 war between Israel and Hizbullah in Lebanon, and the cyclical escalations of

violence between Israel and Hamas in the south of the country—all of which resulted in the death of thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese civilians. In a parallel and related path, the gradual extension of Palestinian citizenship rights in Israel that had characterized the Rabin government era (1992–1995) had ended and was even reversed, expressed through a wave of discriminatory legislation against Palestinian citizens.

In March 2011, Israel's Knesset approved what became known as Nakba Law, authorizing the Minister of Finance to halt public funding for organizations (read: Arab municipalities) who support the commemoration of "Israel's Independence Day or the day of its establishment as a day of mourning." The law aimed specifically to discipline Palestinian commemoration in the public sphere (Sorek 2015: 159–160). Similarly, since 2011, Jewish Knesset members were initiating the Basic Law: Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People, which was finally approved in 2018. The law downgrades the public status of Arab language and lends discriminatory policies against Palestinians constitutional status and greater legitimacy.⁶

This wave, along with frustration over the failed emancipatory process of the 1990s, pushed many Palestinians in Israel toward reconsidering their integrative aspirations. There were many indicators of this growing frustration and reassessment of the value of Israeli citizenship in the early twenty-first century. In terms of political behavior, there has been a gradual decline in the voter turnout of Palestinian citizens for Knesset, with the exception of the 2015 elections and the second 2019 elections, following the merging of four Arab parties into one list. This tendency corresponds with various striking attitudes expressed in public opinion surveys. For example, the Index of Arab-Jewish Relations conducted by Sammy Smooha shows that between 2003 and 2012 there was a sharp decline in the number of Palestinian citizens who are happy with their lives as Israeli citizens; feel pride when Israel gains a major international achievement; trust the Israeli judiciary; trust the Knesset; think that Israel has the right to exist as an independent state; think that the country between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is a shared homeland for Arabs and Jews (this declined from two-thirds to one-third in less than a decade!); see their Israeli citizenship as more important than their national identity as Palestinians or their religious affiliation (declined from 30 percent to 12 percent); and believe that their way of life and behavior is more similar to that of Jewish Israelis than to that of Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (from 72 percent to 54 percent). At the same time, there has been a sharp increase in the number of Palestinian citizens who reported they were personally harmed by threats, humiliation, or assault by Jews; personally affected by discrimination; or were afraid of being expelled (Smooha 2013).

Therefore, on the one hand, Israeli governments and legislators provided more reasons for protest, while on the other, the tendency of Arab soccer fans to avoid antagonizing Jewish audiences has diminished because its original purpose, integration, seems unattainable or less desirable. This process has been reflected in a gradual linguistic shift. In the early 2000s, the vast majority of the slogans and chants of Sakhnin fans were also in Hebrew, borrowed from Jewish Israeli national fans, and avoided Arab patriotic rhetoric. Hebrew has not disappeared since then. The Arabic of Arab soccer players in Israel is highly Israelified and the penetration of Hebrew vocabulary is highly remarkable, much more than the average Hebraization of other Arab citizens.⁷ In terms of public fan culture, though, it has been significantly diluted with Arabic chants and songs.

Arab-Palestinian identity in Israel had already been highly politicized even before 2000. Palestinians in Israel had already suffered significant collective shocks, such as the Kafr Qasim Massacre of 1956 and Land Day in 1976. These events and their commemorations became cornerstones of political mobilization, but without politicizing the soccer stadium, which in the past remained an enclave in which political protest was suspended. Did the violence of 2000 have a different effect? The escalation in violence in 2000, while it certainly undermined the rigid boundaries between dynamics inside and outside the stadium, might not have been sufficient by itself to politicize the stadium. This time the local dynamics were supported by regional and global developments.

Globalization of Fan Culture and the Arab Spring

A crucial element in the politicization of the stadium was the emergence of Ultras Sakhnin. Originally a Brazilian, Serbian, and Italian phenomenon, the Ultras are informal fan organizations consisting of young working-class men, usually with an anti-establishment orientation and transgressive tendencies, and sometimes with a radical left-wing or right-wing political orientation (Testa 2009). Especially in Italy, their discourse and practice are frequently borrowed in part from extra-parliamentary political organizations. The Sakhnin fans have been particularly influenced by two Ultras models, a local one, associated with the Jewish Israeli club, Hapoel Tel Aviv, and a regional one, the Egyptian club al-Ahly. The Ultras of Hapoel Tel Aviv (established in 1999), who highlight socialist and anti-racist slogans (Sorek 2019) inspired the establishment of Ultras Sakhnin, who consciously modeled their *modus operandi* after Ultras Hapoel, a process that reflected the warm relationship between the diehard fans of both teams, as well as their shared anti-racist political agenda.

Ultras Sakhnin was established in 2003, but in its first years its members mainly adopted the visual and stylistic choreography of Ultras Hapoel, such as the use of large drums, flares, and giant flags. What finally triggered the continuous politicization of the soccer stadium was the revolutionary wave of demonstrations in the Arab world that began in December 2010 and became known as the Arab Spring. Across many Arab countries, the demonstrations shared some methods of protest—strikes, marches, and rallies—as well as the use of social media to communicate and raise awareness. According to some commentators, the Ultras of al-Ahly club (Ahlawy) played a key role in the demonstrations that forced Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign in February 2011 (Dorsey 2012; Woltering 2013). For decades, soccer had been a key non-religious, non-governmental institution capable of confronting repressive regimes in the Middle East, and the Arab Spring made this politicization highly visible and potentially viral.

Egyptian soccer had served as a model for Palestinian soccer since the 1930s, and the al-Ahly club specifically has played a role in the national imagination of Arabs in Israel since at least the 1960s. It was no wonder that in their attempt to encourage fans to cheer their team in Arabic rather than Hebrew, the Ultras adopted prominent chants from al-Ahly. Similarly, the political role played by Ahlawy in toppling the Mubarak regime, and the general politicization of the Egyptian soccer stadium was noted by Sakhnin's fans.

A relatively recent addition to the repertoire of Sakhnin fans is the song "Paradise, Paradise, My Homeland," originally an Iraqi patriotic song (lyrics by Karim al-'Iraqi) that gained many local adaptations, including in the Palestinian context, and was adopted by protesters throughout the Arab world during the Arab Spring. An especially famous performance of the song was delivered by 'Abd al-Bassat al-Sarout, a former goalkeeper of the Under-17 Syrian national team, who became a rebel (and was killed in 2019).⁸ It is difficult to prove a causal relationship here, but although Palestinians had been familiar with the song for decades, it was only following the Arab Spring that it became part of soccer fan culture.

Adopting the spirit of politicized soccer, protests against specific governmental policy also became part of the stadium repertoire. In June 2013, the Knesset approved a controversial plan to forcibly displace some 40,000–70,000 Negev/Naqab Bedouin from areas not recognized by the government to government-recognized local councils (the Prawer Plan) (Abu-Rass and Yiftachel 2012). The Bedouin community, as well human rights groups strongly disapproved the plan, and a series of demonstrations in November 2013 forced the government to reconsider it. In this context, at the beginning of a game between Sakhnin and Beitar Jerusalem

at Sakhnin stadium on 17 December 2013, the Ultras deployed a giant banner (approximately 70 x 10 meters), with the slogan: “One voice, one people, steadfastly for Naqab [Negev].” Underneath the text, they drew a face covered with Palestinian kaffiyeh and a hand holding a slingshot, echoing icons of the Palestinian uprisings in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.⁹ This explicit visualization of physical resistance in the stadium would have been unimaginable a decade earlier.

The political and nationalist orientation of the Ultras is represented even in their main anthem, whose lyrics end with the words: “Our cry is the color of the kaffiyeh strings/ with God’s help we will achieve the dream of freedom.” Ultras Sakhnin, however, have adopted, a mild, cautious, and relatively nonviolent version of the Ultras culture. Unlike the privileged Hapoel Tel Aviv fans, as Arab citizens in Israel they are being watched much more carefully by the authorities, and they face a much lower threshold of tolerance. In addition, the desire of Palestinian fans to be accepted by Jewish fans as equal Israeli citizens remains.

Therefore, with some rare exceptions, the display of explicit political messages or Palestinian flags in the stadium is not omnipresent; they are reserved almost exclusively for games against arch-rival Beitar Jerusalem, the only Israeli professional team that has never hired an Arab player and whose Ultras fans (La Familia) are known for their explicit and blatant anti-Arab racism. This is a rivalry with its own rules, as both fans and players feel that politicization is legitimate. For example, before a game against Beitar on 18 January 2016, the Sakhnin Ultras uploaded an interview they had conducted with Sakhnin’s captain, Khaled Khalalyleh, who called Arab fans from throughout the country to come and support Sakhnin against “the racist team.”¹⁰ In the text introducing the interview, the game was described as “the mother of all battles.”

As the sociologist Amir Ben Porat has shown, behavior of Arab spectators is highly influenced and shaped by the actions of the Jewish crowd (Ben Porat 2001), and thus the identity of the opponent has considerable influence on the vocabulary and symbols Sakhnin fans display in the stadium. One of the Ultras Sakhnin leaders told me, “Usually I prefer to leave the Palestinian flag out of the stadium. It creates a chain reaction that leads to conflicts between the fans and summoning to police interrogation, but there is one exception—games against Beitar. In this context every kind of protest or provocation is legitimate.”

Indeed, even though the team management asks fans to avoid bringing Palestinian flags to the stadium and even though before Sakhnin–Beitar games the police announce a ban on them, the flag is visible during almost every game between the two clubs, as well as other Palestinian national icons such as representations of the Dome of the Rock and the Palestinian

kaffiyeh, which are painted on giant banners deployed across the bleachers. The slogans on these banners, such as “Jerusalem is ours,” merge Palestinian national sentiments with the particular animosity against Beitar. Only in games against Beitar can one hear the chant: “By blood, by spirit, we will redeem you, al-Aqsa.”¹¹ Following Sakhnin’s victory in Beitar’s home stadium on 15 March 2014, fans chanted: “God, Sakhnin, Jerusalem is Arab.”¹²

The Emergence of the Social Media Sphere

In *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State*, I distinguished between Arabic sports journalists (who emphasize the Arab identity of players and teams and use martial metaphors, with specific references to the Arab–Israeli conflict) and mainstream fans who tend to avoid the politicization of the soccer stadium, who persist on defining a soccer game between Arab and Jewish clubs as a struggle between two Israeli sport teams.

The appearance of social media has undermined the old hierarchies of knowledge production and dissemination. More specifically for the context under discussion, this media has blurred the line between journalists and fans: fans now report live from the game with their own voice and own interpretation. The result is that the explicit public display of Arab and Palestinian national pride and the overt political mobilization that was evident in the past only in the Arabic press, is now presented by fans themselves. One prominent example is a clip uploaded to the Ultras Facebook page *Sakhnin Ultras 03*, on 17 March 2015, which was election day in Israel.¹³ In that election, for the first time, four Arab parties joined forces to create the Joint List, often referred to as the Joint Arab List. This unprecedented ability to overcome divisions raised widespread hope for Arab unity and for increased political power. The clip aggregated some impressive goals Sakhnin scored against Beitar Jerusalem and screened them while playing in the background the election campaign jingle of the Joint List, *In the People’s Name*. After the goals, while the song is still heard, a text was displayed: “Write down: I am an Arab/and my vote is WD’AM [the letter symbol of the Joint List in the elections]/we make history.” This text paraphrases the famous poem of the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, *Raqam Hawiyya*, (Identity Card Number). In this poem, written in the 1950s under the military government that Arabs in Israel endured from 1949 to 1966, Darwish highlights the proud standing of the Arab citizen in the face of the Israeli state’s attempt to undermine his identity. The Ultras were following the path of an Arab sports journalist who, years earlier, had used the same poem to promote a sense of Arab national pride around successful Arab teams. It was also the most explicit example of

direct politicization of Arab soccer in Israel; it connected Sakhnin's goals directly to a well-known political statement.

Furthermore, Facebook provides fans a public sphere with broader margins of tolerance for nationalist rhetoric than the stadium. Therefore, the Ultras upload to their Facebook page content related to the most sacred taboos in the Arab-Jewish relationship, including the right of return of Palestinian refugees and even the armed struggle. For example, following an impressive victory over Hapoel Tel Aviv on 17 October 2015, the Ultras uploaded a clip of the game's highlights, accompanied by the song "Biladi, Biladi" (my country). During the 'golden age' of pan-Arabism, this was an Egyptian national song (in 1979, it became the official Egyptian national anthem).

The song has been popular among Palestinians and was incorporated into the canon of the Fatah movement, but the lyrics were modified to fit the Palestinian context, the aspirations for return, and the revolutionary spirit of Fatah. In many circles it was considered an unofficial Palestinian national anthem. In the 1970s and the 1980s, singing the song was sufficient grounds for the Israeli police to detain activists for 'incitement' (Sorek 2015: 186), though the Communist Party had modified the lyrics to make the song less militant. Many Jewish Israelis consider it a provocation when it was performed by Arab citizens and previously it had been rarely used by soccer fans, and then only in contexts of extreme tension (Ben Porat 2001). On the Ultras Facebook page, though, it is only one expression out of many, of blunt and militant Palestinian patriotism.

On 13 February 2015, days before a game against Beitar, the Ultras uploaded to their Facebook page a clip depicting the highlights from the most memorable victory of Sakhnin over Beitar, 4:1, in October 2004. The clip was accompanied by a well-known revolutionary Palestinian song, praising the armed struggle: "Get out, my enemy / from every house, neighborhood and street / by my weapon and my faith—get out / ... / by our hand grenade / we declared a popular war."¹⁴ In addition, the Ultras uploaded songs to their page clips praising the al-Aqsa Intifada, as well as praise of legendary Palestinian leaders, including Abu 'Amar (Yasser Arafat); Abu Jihad (Khalil al-Wazir, one of the founders of Fatah, assassinated by Israel in 1988); Abu Ali Mustafa (leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, assassinated by Israel in 2001); Ahmad Yassin (founder of Hamas, assassinated by Israel in 2004); and Fathi Shqaqi (founder of the Islamic Jihad, assassinated by Israel in 1995). Not coincidentally, this clip was uploaded at the same day Sakhnin played against Beitar in October 2015.¹⁵

Such an explicit public glorification of armed struggle is uncommon among Palestinian citizens of Israel, and even more so among soccer fans. Sakhnin fans know that they are under constant surveillance

and are frequently summoned by the police even after using much more benign slogans in the stadium. Their shaky status as Israeli citizens usually dictates a high level of self-censorship. There is no doubt that the provocative racist rhetoric of Beitar fans largely explains the appearance of militant nationalist rhetoric in this context. More important, however, is the appearance of the social media sphere itself, which did not exist in the early 2000s and now provides a stage for rhetoric considered too defiant to be tolerated in the stadium, even by Sakhnin's fans. The Ultras' Facebook page operates exclusively in Arabic, unlike the stadium where Hebrew, although declining, remains prominent in chants, slogans, and curses. Thus, social media created a public sphere in which, unlike in the soccer stadium, Jewish Israeli fans are irrelevant and therefore there is no need to take their sensitivities into consideration.

To be clear, social media is under surveillance as well, and some Palestinians were even arrested and convicted for content they published online (Santos 2018). As a general rule, though, with regard to soccer fans the police intervene only in order to prevent the organization of certain activities, but so far they are less interested in content analysis. Thus, content that the police might consider inflammatory in the stadium is still tolerated on Facebook.

Scholars of social movements have already shown that, under conditions of surveillance, social media play a role in providing a mechanism for the spread of shared grievances and the growth of networks that are difficult for the government to control (Castells 2013). Even more important for our discussion, however, is the role of cyber-activism in articulating radical and utopian ideas barely tolerated in the non-virtual public sphere, and thus they stretch the boundaries of legitimate discourse. No wonder social media have been heavily used by members of hegemonized ethnonational groups whose politicization is seen as a threat by their respective state authorities (Pandi 2014). Social media, however, are not isolated from the stadium and the more radical content spills over and crosses the boundaries into the physical world. It is the myth-making power of the cybersphere that might well have provided fans with the self-confidence to bring some of the more daring content into the stadium.

The Depoliticizing Forces

The forces that prevented politicization of the stadium have not disappeared. As much as journalists in Hebrew media sports were eager embrace and support Arab athletic success in the past, the demise of the two-state solution even enhanced this tendency.

Soccer has played an important role in emphasizing differences between various categories of Palestinians who since 1967 live under what the Israeli sociologist Baruch Kimmerling named the “Israeli control system” (Kimmerling 1989). The territory under this control system, between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, is ruled by ethnocratic principles that preserve Jewish domination while dividing Palestinians among various subgroups with different levels of civil rights, political rights, and economic opportunities (Yiftachel 1999). This internal hierarchy places Palestinian citizens in an intermediate political status between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian non-citizens and ensures their relative benefits vis-à-vis their fellow Palestinians.

In the soccer sphere, only Palestinian citizens of Israel are part of the Israeli Football Association. Once you cross the Green Line to the West Bank, only Jewish teams play in the Association, while Palestinians are excluded. This arrangement ensures Jewish hegemony in Israeli soccer and perpetuates the minority status of Arab citizens—much like in the political sphere. In the past, Arab soccer fans tended to avoid the overt questioning of this division between ‘Arab-Israelis’ and Palestinians. Soccer has been an important sphere of ‘Israelization’ of Palestinian citizens that emphasized the distance between them and Palestinians beyond the Green Line. This distinction is crucial for Israeli Jews to imagine themselves as the majority and Israel as a democracy. It also abates Jewish Israeli anxiety about confronting a unified Palestinian front. The explicit emphasis on Palestinian unity is an emerging phenomenon, challenging the ethnocratic order.

Therefore, fans and players who publicly embrace Palestinian national symbols face an immediate pushback. In 2013, Muhammad Gadir, a leading Sakhnin player, posed for a photo with some fans and a Palestinian flag immediately after his team’s victory against Hapoel Tel Aviv. Angry reactions in the Hebrew sports media forced him to release a depoliticized statement: “I do not deal with politics. When I posed for a photo with the flag, I did not think about it. For me, it was just responding to the fans’ request.”¹⁶ The team’s administration took part in the disciplinary efforts and demanded the fans to leave the flags out of stadium.¹⁷

The strong disciplinary pressure on Arab players is broader than the individual case of Sakhnin. In the summer of 2014, in the middle of an Israeli military campaign in the Gaza Strip that cost 2,200 Palestinians their lives, Beram Kayal, an Arab player on the Israeli national team, who at the time played in Scotland for Celtic FC, uploaded to his Instagram account a photo of himself playing, while some Palestinian flags are seen in the background waved by Celtic fans in the bleachers. The alarmed reactions in the Hebrew media and by the Israeli Football Association

(IFA) pushed him to remove the photo after a short while.¹⁸ The IFA published an announcement praising Kayal for his contribution to the national team and added: “Surely, there was no political intention here, God forbid. Immediately after we directed his attention to the issue, Kayal was quick to remove the photo, so no one would be hurt.” Kayal, whose grandparents were expelled from their village Birwa in 1948, but remained inside the armistice line and became Israeli citizens, had to accept the depoliticizing pressure. In a 2018 interview to the Hebrew newspaper *Yedioth Aharonot* he was asked: “How do you define yourself, an Israeli, an Arab-Israeli, a Palestinian?” This is a ritualistic question ensuring Jewish Israeli audiences that the Green Line still exists in the minds of Arab citizens. Kayal knew that there is only one possible answer in the prewritten script and answered: “I am an Israeli-Arab who lives in the State of Israel.”¹⁹

As these examples show, the political orientation of Arab soccer in Israel is still contested, and the recent politicization of the bleachers is only one tendency in a very complex and multifaceted struggle over the meaning of Arab athletic success.

Concluding Remarks

The sports arena has, on the one hand, considerable symbolic power, and is therefore a sphere where political resources are readily available (Allison 1986). On the other hand, as clearly illustrated by the changes in Arab soccer since the mid-2000s, sports in itself is not stamped by any particular value system; it is a flexible tool for potential action in different directions (Hoberman 1984). These characteristics turn the sports arena into contested terrain (Bourdieu 1988; Hartmann 2000), an arena in which struggles are waged over the potential meanings that can be attributed to it and over the formulations of identities that are derived from these meanings.

Until the mid-2000s, those forces that supported an integrative orientation had the upper hand in the struggle over the meaning of Arab soccer in Israel. Since then, however, the dominance of this interpretation has been significantly eroded. The penetration of political protest and Palestinian identity to the stadium is the combined product of several forces and processes: several cycles of escalation in violence in the region, a wave of anti-Arab legislation, the globalization of fan culture, the model of a politicized soccer fan provided during the Arab Spring, and the emergence of social media.

For many soccer fans, if not most, their motivation to be accepted by Jewish fans as equal Israeli citizens remains, but this no longer prevents the explicit politicization of their discourse. It is important to remember,

though, that Ultras groups are commonly more politicized than the majority of the fans and sympathizers of any given team, and many fans are still uncomfortable with the explicit display of political protest in the stadium and with the defiant tone of the Ultras. In addition, while the demise of the two-state solution might contribute to politicizing Arab fans, at the same time it motivates journalists in the Hebrew media to further distinguish Palestinian citizens in Israel from other Palestinians. This dynamic enables a certain pushback of an integrative vector into the equation of meanings.

Regardless of the far reaching changes in the field, I did not alter my basic view on the potential political power of soccer in power dynamics in Israel/Palestine, and therefore I end this article with the same warning I used to conclude *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State*: the soccer arena holds the potential for blurring the ethnic/national distinctions between Jews and Arabs in Israel and, in a country where resources are divided in large part according to this distinction, this is not an insignificant matter. Indeed, soccer can serve as an ideal model of equality between Jews and Arabs. The danger lies in transforming soccer into an enclave, delineated in time and space, in which equality exists, but whose symbolic power is exploited in order to distract attention from dispossession and discrimination, which rule in almost all other spheres of life.

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NOTES

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