



## THE ISLAMIC SOCCER LEAGUE IN ISRAEL: SETTING MORAL BOUNDARIES BY TAMING THE WILD

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*This article strives to use the institutional and discursive strategies employed by the Islamic Movement in Israel in the soccer sphere to illustrate wider theoretical arguments about setting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in the public sphere. The Islamic Movement uses an isolationist strategy, by creating the independent Islamic Soccer League. In contrast, social agents who strive to promote integration in Israeli society or, alternatively, Arab-Palestinian national pride encourage the involvement of Arab teams and players in the Israeli Football Association. The article argues that the isolationist strategy is inherent in the attempts of a religious movement to articulate a definition of collective identity that is based on a sacred moral code. Then, relying mainly on the contents of the sports sections of the Islamic press, the article analyzes the inevitable tensions stemming from the use of an institution with a strong secular orientation for the purpose of reproducing religious identity.*

*Key Words: minorities, religion, Islam, sports, Israel*

Since 1986 the Islamic movement in Israel has been running its own independent soccer league. This league, separate from the Israeli Football Association, defies the general tendency of the Arab soccer players and fans in Israel to use soccer as a channel for integration. This article strives to use the institutional and discursive strategies employed by the Islamic Movement in the soccer sphere in order to illustrate wider theoretical arguments about the modes of setting boundaries for inclusion and exclusion by a religious organization and national minority in the public sphere, in conditions of competition between differing optional codes of identity.

This article therefore includes two mutually dependent arguments. First, the attempt to construct an identity based on cultural-moral principles with a universal orientation gives the boundaries of identity an a priori diffuseness and permeability. Therefore, when faced with such a symbolically powerful domain as soccer, and in conditions of relative weakness, social agents trying to promote such an identity tend to turn inward on themselves, and construct an autonomous frame-

work, one that emphasizes its uniqueness and moral superiority. This stands in opposition to attempts to construct a national identity with a primordial leaning, which tend to increase interaction and the number of points of friction with the majority.

Secondly, I argue that within the discourse of an Islamic religious organization, there are structural tensions between the aspirations to promote identity based on a moral code and the instrumental use of a secular-oriented institution such as soccer. This discourse is based on two dimensions of a dialectical tension that are connected to one another. In the first dimension, soccer is understood and described as a site that serves as an outlet for violent urges—as opposed to Islam, presented as a restraining force in this regard. Following this logic, the Islamic League is a locale in which Islam tames the wild and takes control of soccer. The other dimension of the dialectical tension is between accepting the dichotomy described above and rejecting it. In other words, from the moment the Islamic Movement decides to include soccer as one of its activities, two diametrically opposed modes, ideally speaking, of relating to it come into being: continuing to present soccer as a bastion of licentiousness, with Islam represented as an attempt to supervise it, or, alternatively, adopting soccer and representing it as directly stemming from Islam itself. This alternation could be done by selectively presenting and appropriately interpreting verses from the Qur'an and the Hadith. The religious leadership of the Islamic Movement has swung back and forth between these two attitudes.

## SETTING MORAL BOUNDARIES BY SPORTS

The theoretical framework of this article uses the typology for codes of inclusion suggested by Eisenstadt and Giesen (1994). Their theory suggests three ideal types of socially constructed codes for inclusion and exclusion: primordiality, the civic code, and the cultural or sacred code.

According to the code of primordiality, distinctions between the “we” and the “other” are constructed as original, natural, and unchangeable. It focuses on structures such as kinship, ethnicity, and race. Because they are attributed to “unchangeable” structures of the world, the boundaries constructed according to this code are highly impermeable.

The civic code is constructed on the basis of familiarity with implicit rules of conduct, traditions, and social routine. This code does not consider collective identity as representing external attributes like nature or the sacred—it is the routines of a community that are regarded as the core of the collective identity.

Finally, in the cultural or sacred code, the boundaries of collective identity are related to an eternal realm of the sacred. These boundaries can be crossed by adopting or leaving the relevant faith, since they are based on moral criteria with a universalistic orientation. The purest illustrations of collectives based on this code are the religions that developed in the “Axial civilizations,” the three monotheistic religions, plus Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. These three ideal types

of codes, I argue, have elective affinity relations with the institutional strategies that social actors choose while attempting to promote distinct definitions of collective identity through sports.

The primordial code has a permanent need for reaffirmation of its “naturalness.” Hence, the importance that modern sports confers on the idea of equality, and on strict formal rules that are meant to neutralize elements unconnected with ability, allows sports to be seen as a mechanism that exposes “natural” differences between the groups (Ashworth 1970). Presenting sports as a locale in which the gaps of political, economic, and social power between the teams are erased makes way for the claim that the differences revealed by the game are real or natural, and thus advances a primordial code of identity. This is one of the reasons that modern nationalism, for which the construction of primordialism constitutes a central characteristic (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1994: 80), needs to build itself on the basis of competition.

At the core of the civic code of identity are the traditions and institutional or constitutional arrangement of a community. Thus, in the case of ethnic or national minorities in a nation-state, a separate traditional sports game may be used to promote the distinctive identity of the minority. However, in the absence of such a game, and when the minority and the majority share their sympathy for the same sport, this sport may contribute to an integration of the minority to hegemonic identity through the civic code.

Unlike the primordial and civic codes of inclusion, the cultural or sacred code tends to develop very tense relations with modern sports. These tense relations are reflected in the rich body of literature on sports and religion (almost exclusively addressing sports and Christianity). The central axis along which these issues have been discussed deals with the tension between the declared secularism of sports and the quasi-religious character of the configurations of its appearance, the functions it fulfills, and the discourse that takes place within it.

Guttman (1978) notes that competitive bodily activity took place in the ancient world, but that there it constituted a part of religious ceremonials and was not an end in itself. He locates the singularity of modern sports in its secularity. Moreover, Guttman, who takes a Weberian viewpoint in his analysis of sports, sees its modern appearance as an inseparable part of the process of “disenchantment,” that is, modern society’s taking leave of the holy and the concealed. Therefore, according to Guttman, modern society’s secularization and the creation of modern sports are connected:

When qualitative distinctions fade and lose their force, we turn to quantitative ones. When we can no longer distinguish the sacred from the profane or even the good from the bad, we content ourselves with minute discriminations between the batting average of the .308 hitter and the .307 hitter. Once the gods have vanished from Mount Olympus or from Dante’s paradise, we can no longer run to appease them or to save our souls, but we can set a new record. It is a uniquely modern form of immortality. (Guttman 1978: 55)

In a way that both complements and opposes modern sports' secular character, many researchers stress that the sporting experience has some of the features of a religious ceremony. The power of the emotions that sports can arouse and the community feeling that it generates have led many writers to compare it to religion (Hoffman 1992). The exceptional status given to sporting competitions in many people's everyday life has brought researchers to term sporting events as "holy space" or "holy time" (Novak 1976). Followers of the Durkheimian tradition see sports as one of the ways for societies to achieve some level of "collective representation," similar to the way religion is seen by that same tradition (Coles 1975; Goodger 1985). Another parallel that has been drawn between sports and religions, particularly monotheistic ones, relates to the notion of justice: in religion, God is right. Sports is based on the belief that the best man will win, and that, ultimately, justice will be done (Slusher 1993). Following these and other lines of comparison, there are those who have labeled sports as a quasi-religious institution (Edwards 1973).

As the most popular branch of sports, soccer has been subjected to particular scrutiny on the part of European sociologists and anthropologists, who have drawn parallels between it and religious ceremonies, either in function (Coles 1975) or in form (Bromberger 1995). Bromberger, however, also qualifies his claims and points out some essential differences. Soccer matches, and the excitement they stir up, do not constitute a coherent and autonomous body of representations, beliefs, and practices. Rather, soccer is a ritual comprised of a jumble of behavioral patterns borrowed from a range of religious-magical worlds. Soccer does not presume to give meaning and content to life, nor does it tell us where we came from and where we are going. Transcendent representations of the world, of first causes, and of ultimate purposes, are lacking from soccer, as are the notions of redemption and the promise of a better future. Soccer has no external aim other than the game itself. These important distinctions, brought to our attention by Bromberger, return us to the strikingly secular face of sports.

On one hand, sports is a secular site. On the other, it has the ability to fulfill functions parallel to religion and to create structures and forms of discourse similar to those of religion. This double-sided face gives sports the potential, under certain circumstances, to become an institution capable of competing with religious ones. In contrast to nationalist organizations, whose attitudes toward the mobilizing potential of sports is unequivocal, religious organizations view the situation as more complex.

Much research has been done describing the ways churches have used sports as a socialization apparatus, with the aim of increasing their attractiveness. For instance, at the end of the 1920s and into the 1930s, churches in the United States saw sports as an important educational tool (Gems 1993; Willis and Wettan 1977). The Italian Catholic Church played an important role in incorporating soccer into Italian life at the end of the nineteenth century, also because of the educational qualities attributed to it (Pivato 1991).

At the same time, examples of opposition and tension between religious organizations and the world of sports can also be found. At the end of the nineteenth century, just as intercollegiate American football was establishing itself, Methodist and Evangelist leaders in the southern United States waged a furious war against the game—primarily against the violence they attributed to it. They saw the game as a waste of time and linked it with alcohol, gambling, and indolence (Doyle 1997; Sears 1993). Decades later, in 1976, when football matches first started to be broadcast live on American television, the churches noted a dramatic fall in Sunday attendance, and they were forced to coordinate their timetables with that of the television guide (Prebish 1992). In pre-Zionist and premodern Judaism, physical strength was not highly valued, and Jews' increased proximity to sports was connected with two processes concerning secularization in Jewish society: integration into European and American society, and the crystallization of the Zionist movement (Eisen 1998). The only religious Zionist sporting organization (Elizur) was established years after the secular ones were set up, and it has always remained a marginal feature on the map of Zionist sports. In Israel, the only big city (more than 150,000 residents) not represented by a soccer team in one of the top three leagues is the ultra-Orthodox B'nei B'rak. In Jewish local authorities, a negative correlation exists between the relative number of Yeshiva students in the settlement's population and the support given to sporting associations by the local authority (Sorek 2001:103).

The relationship between organized religion and sports can be one of competition. Religious sporting organizations have very rarely been formed, and then only as a reaction to sports' increasing dominance in their immediate vicinity. A similar example to the Islamic League is that of the Evangelist church's hockey league in Canada. This league was also founded by a fundamentalist religious organization, with the aim of providing an alternative sporting environment, one that would preserve Christian Evangelist values, which were perceived as contrary to the competitive and violent nature of the game as we know it (Stevenson and Dunn 1998).

The reserved and suspicious attitude held by the universalist religions toward sports, particularly in their fundamentalist guises, stands in stark contrast to its eager adoption by nationalist movements. Nationalist movements may well oppose a particular sport if it represents a hostile culture, or if it is identified with cultural imperialism, in cases of conflict between natives and conquerors. It is common to find that this opposition is replaced by an embracing of the sport, along with a desire to use that very same sport to demonstrate the collective's ability. This was the fate of cricket in India (Appadurai 1996) and of soccer in Egypt (Wagg 1995), Yemen (Stevenson and Alaug 1997), and Zimbabwe (Stuart 1996).

As I claimed earlier, the attraction of national movements to sports is partially related to its assumed ability to construct "naturalness." On the other hand, a religious order with a universal message, such as Islam, is less in need of primordialism for ratification via supervised and quantifying competition, and does not require

the construction of an inherent nature. Thus global sporting organizations are comprised of national units: Germany plays soccer against Portugal, and Holland against Italy, but never have “the Christians” played against “the Buddhists.” These differences have substantial implications on the institutional sportive strategies chosen by different agents of identity among the Muslims in Israel and on the meanings they ascribe to sporting activity.

## **SOCCER AND THE OPTIONAL COLLECTIVE IDENTITIES FOR THE MUSLIMS IN ISRAEL**

Muslims in Israel constitute the majority (about 75 percent) of the Arab Palestinian minority in Israel (which constitutes about 19 percent of the total population in Israel in its pre-1967 borders). Their participation in the political sphere is influenced by their affiliation with several circles of identity, some of which compete for importance and dominance (Kimmerling and Moore 1997). Three of these dimensions are most relevant to the political organization of Muslims in Israel: Islamic religious identity, Palestinian national identity, and Israeli identity (see also Rouhana and Ghanem 1998; Smootha 1999). Different identity agents try to promote different definitions of collective identity. As a crude generalization, I argue that each one of these three dimensions is promoted mainly through one of the aforementioned ideal types of identity codes.

The boundaries of Palestinian identity have been defined mainly by the primordial code. The nationalist ideology of “Palestinian-ness” as outlined by both popular discourse (Swedenburg 1995: 80–81) and formal national leadership like the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) assumes the existence of an inherent identity. This nature of Palestinian identity is connected by a primordial genealogical continuity from the ancient past, and it is best illustrated in Clause 4 of the Palestinian National Covenant: “The Palestinian identity is a genuine, essential, and inherent characteristic; it is transmitted from parents to children. . . .” Thus, a Palestinian can always rediscover his “Palestinian-ness” even if it was forgotten somehow. On the other hand, for someone who is not born to Palestinian parents, there is no way of becoming a Palestinian. This kind of identity is fundamentally different from the cultural-sacred code of Islam, which ideally has open boundaries.

In large part, this perception of natural boundaries with genealogical roots in the ancient past echoes the Zionist claims about the genealogical continuity of the Jewish people and its connection to the disputed land. As for the Palestinian minority within the Jewish state, these tendencies are even intensified. Israeli collective identity contains an inherent tension between the primordial and the civic code of identity (Kimmerling 1985). The dominance of the primordial code in Israeli identity, which sets Judaism as the main criterion for belonging, excludes all Arabs, irrespective of their religious beliefs or political affiliations. On the other hand, in order to obtain resources from the state and to be accepted by the Jewish majority, the Arabs in Israel have an interest in emphasizing the civic dimension of

Israeli collective identity. For them, being an Israeli is possible only according to this criterion. Thus, social agents seeking to promote integration of Arab citizens into Israeli society emphasize its civic dimension.

By comparison, a close examination of the Islamic Movement's rhetoric reveals the extent to which it emphasizes the cultural or sacred code and belief in the universal message embedded in Islam. Unlike Palestinian identity's rules of inclusion, which leaves no room for voluntary joining or abandoning, Muslim identity is based on the adoption or the maintenance of certain moral principles.

This is not an essentialist argument about Islam, which encompasses a broad range of interpretations. For example, as it is represented in the ideology of Arab nationalism, Islam is a set of symbols without any relevance to the political order (Halliday 2000). However, when Islam is used as a political program, it stresses the collective enforcement of public morals (Ayoubi 1995). Although this tendency is not unique to the Islamic Movement in Israel, the dialogic and competitive encounter with several other optional collective identities has sharpened this feature.

These distinctions are well expressed in the realm of soccer. As a realm of shared Arab-Jewish masculine culture, soccer provides a rare opportunity for Arab men to imagine themselves as a part of the Israeli community, based on a civic code of identity. Hence, social agents who are interested in integration in Israeli society would encourage the participation of Arabs in the Israeli soccer leagues. At the same time, promoting the Palestinian nationalist code also requires participation in the same leagues, because the sportive encounters provide an opportunity to expose the "real nature" of this civic identity.

On the contrary, being focused on the sacred moral code, the construction of Islamic identity may be menaced by its exposure to the world of soccer. First, as discussed above, there is a strong tendency of world religions to develop tense relations with modern sports. Second, this menace stems from the suspicious attitude of the Islamic Movement toward Western culture. While a Christian church might see sports as a competing institution with the potential for moral degradation, the Islamic Movement, which has placed struggle with the symbols of Western culture as one of its aims, also faces a competitive cultural challenge. One of the most prominent features of political Islam in general, including that of the Islamic Movement that developed in Israel during the 1980s, is a struggle with the indicators of Western culture. A part of the instinctive opposition to soccer among Islamic leaders stemmed from its identification with the West.

The strategic decision to deal with the threat by incorporating it—in other words, by creating a locale that is identified with secularism and the West, but which is under Islamic supervision—inevitably leads to tensions and internal contradictions in that locale's activity and discourse. These tensions are liable to be reflected both in the games themselves, as well as in their accompanying rhetoric. Before examining these tensions and contradictions, I will briefly describe the background of the Islamic League and the circumstances under which it was formed.

## THE ISLAMIC LEAGUE: GENERAL BACKGROUND

Since the beginning of the 1980s, an awakening in the activity of Islamic organizations among the Arabs in Israel has been noticeable, an awakening not unconnected to similar processes that have taken place in other locations in the Middle East. Rekhess (1998) writes that the accelerated processes of modernization, urbanization, and proletarianization challenged the traditional power base and the structure of the family, thus creating a vacuum. As a result, there was a steep rise in crime and drug use, and a yearning for a new social order came into being. Political Islam fulfilled this need. The Islamic awakening in Israel began in the 1970s and drew from the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood, which demanded that religion be afforded a place in every part of existence (Aburaiya 1991: 118). Therefore, according to this approach, Islam can offer ways of coping with crisis-laden social situations—hence the Islamic Movement’s main slogan: “Islam is the solution.”

Islamic Associations carrying out educational and community activity—campaigns for eliminating alcohol, making collections and distributing money to needy families and students, and so on—began to appear in Arab villages, particularly in “the Triangle,” at the beginning of the 1980s (Rekhess 1998). A prominent characteristic of these associations has been their complete and comprehensive involvement in the local communities in which they are rooted. Unlike isolationist ventures like al-Arqam project in Malaysia (Hassan 1997), the Islamic Movement considered itself from its embryonic stages as an integral part of the Muslim society.

In Um Al-Fahm, in the Triangle, Islamic activists set up a large medical center that gave free medical services, a rehabilitation center for drug addicts, and an institute for Islamic studies (Aburaiya 1991: 132–136). In addition, committees were formed that organized social activities with an Islamic slant: art, festivals, and weddings (Aburaiya 1991: 108). A special emphasis was placed on information-imparting meetings and the *The Da’wa* – the call to the Islamic religion and the dissemination of its values. In 1983, representatives of the Islamic Movement ran for office in the municipal elections. In 1989 the Movement’s achievements were impressive—five mayors, as well as weighty representation in all 12 of the Arab local councils and the two mixed cities in which the Movement flourished. From then up until 1998, the Islamic Movement retained its power and built upon it. In Um Al-Fahm, Jaljulia, and Kufr Qassim, the Movement has held on to the position of mayor since first having its representative elected. Rabinowitz (1995) pins this success mainly on the Islamic Movement’s ability to raise funds from the central government, as well as by increasing internal collections. The internal collections were successful on account of holding what Rabinowitz calls a “moral insurance certificate”—in other words, its identification with local traditions, old Islamic values, and conservative social norms, as well as the vision of a state ruled by Islamic law. These clear principles make the danger that the Movement will be seen as selling out Palestinian honor more remote, and ensure that it will not be

perceived as co-opted by the state. It could be supposed that some of the characteristics just mentioned also helped the Islamic Movement's leadership disassociate itself from specific family or clan-based interests within the settlements.

In its selective adoption of modern structures and institutions the Islamic Movement attempts to draw a line between the medium and its content. For example, it does not avoid the appropriation of modern technology, and it takes advantage of any possible medium like television and the internet. However, the Islamic Movement strictly rejects any kind of mixing of the sexes in the public sphere, and it is extremely concerned with the liberal appearance of the female body in public. Women's beauty pageants, for example, have been the target of harsh attacks by the Movement's leaders. Among pious believers, Western styles of clothing have been rejected in favor of traditional Islamic clothing, characterized by simplicity and modesty for both men and women. Other symbols of Western culture such as rock music and Western films have been decried by the Islamic Movement as corrupt and corrupting.

The decision to adopt or reject a certain institution or ideology is not only related to medium-content distinction, but is also a function of power relations. When a cultural institution or ideology is too popular and deeply embedded in the social texture, it is safer for the Islamic Movement to adopt it and control its content rather than to avoid it altogether. This is, for example, the dynamic that led to the incorporation of Palestinian nationalism into the discourse of the Islamic Movement. The local branches of the Muslim Brotherhood, as elsewhere, have rejected nationalism as a secular and exclusivist ideology. The traditional perception of the Muslim Brotherhood considered it as a foreign implant, intended to undermine Islamic unity. Hence, it is not a coincidence that before 1988 the Islamists in Israel did not participate officially, as a separate organization, in Land Day ceremonies,<sup>1</sup> the major expression of Palestinian national identity inside Israel.

The strategic decision of the Islamic Movement to take part in municipal elections since 1989 supplied the motivation to integrate Palestinian nationalism in its own discourse. The earlier adoption of territorial nationalism by the Muslim Brotherhood in the occupied Palestinian territories (Frisch 1994; Litvak 1996) acted as an important source of legitimacy for this development. Nationalist sentiments and their expression in the Land Day anniversaries were too popular to confront; instead, they were adopted in spite of initial antagonism.

To some extent, the treatment of sports by the Islamic Movement is similar to its treatment of nationalist ideology. Unlike rock music, the overwhelming popularity of soccer makes it too powerful an adversary to face head on. This popularity stands behind the uniqueness of the separate Islamic League in Israel—nowhere else in the Muslim world was a separate Islamic league established.

The sociopolitical profile of the Islamic Movement in Israel and its religious-political discourse is not unique among those countries with a large Muslim population. Similar movements that strive to give Islam a political role have flourished in many Muslim societies under secular regimes in such countries as Egypt, Tur-

key, Indonesia, and Malaysia. However, none of these countries has a separate Islamic sports league. In order to understand the specific urge of the Islamic Movement in Israel to establish a soccer league, one should be aware of the special importance of soccer in the leisure time of Arabs in Israel.

This importance stems from the need of the Arab minority in Israel to relieve the tension created by the contradictory expectations created by their identities as Palestinians by nationality and Israelis by citizenship. The soccer sphere serves in this context as an “integral enclave,” a social sphere that is ruled by a liberal-integrative discourse of citizenship in sharp contrast to the ethnic discourse that rules the Israeli general public sphere (Sorek 2003).

This need is expressed in the astonishing over-representation of Arab teams in the Israeli Football Association (42 percent of the teams, compared to 19 percent of the population). It is also expressed in the significantly higher numbers of ticket sales among Arab teams compared to Jewish teams, which is disproportionate to the sizes of the Arab villages and towns; in television ratings of football programs among Arabs, which are much higher than among Jews; and finally by the significantly higher financial support given to soccer clubs by Arab local authorities compared to Jewish local authorities. Although soccer is very popular in Egypt and Turkey, this popularity has not reached a point where the agents of political Islam have felt the need to confront it by establishing a parallel institution.

In Israel, the world of soccer exposed Arab citizens to long-term interactions with the Jewish majority. Apart from the officials, who were in constant contact with their Jewish colleagues, and apart from the Jewish players on Arab teams and vice versa, every Saturday thousands of Arab fans take their places in the bleachers next to Jewish fans. Majority-minority relations, as well as the real and imagined power relations between the two sides, meant that the bulk of influence would be in the direction of the Arab fans adopting those behavioral patterns and modes of expression typical of the Jewish fans.

There is no better testimony to this than the language heard at the games: the songs, cheers, and swearing of the Arab fans are largely taken from the verbal Hebrew repertoire of Israeli soccer supporters as a whole and lack any national-based uniqueness. However, the Islamic Movement’s concern went beyond language and touched on the explicitly secular feature that saw the enjoyment gained from watching a game of soccer as an end in itself. By meeting at the soccer stadium, Jews and Arabs were mutually emphasizing and strengthening the secular basis of their identities.

While “Arabness” or “Palestinianness,” as written about in secular sports journalism, are natural characteristics, which at the most can cover up external characteristics, Islam is a diffuse element at the foundation of one’s identity. The Islamic Movement was concerned that, under conditions of high exposure to secular values and lifestyles, religious foundation could be worn away. The sports sections of the secular Arab newspapers cover the Arab teams in the Israeli League and demand that the Arab teams preserve their Arab identity (Sorek 2003). At the same

time, the newspapers do not see the very encounter itself as threatening to Arab Palestinian identity. But for the Islamic Movement, the encounter constitutes a definite threat. For secular nationalist streams in Arab society in Israel, "Israelization" represents a challenge to "Arabness." However, for the Islamic Movement, "Israelization" stands for a process of secularization. The Islamic Movement's "rampart-guarding" had the aim of standing up to the secular basis of the process of "Israelization," as well to the secular foundations of Arab society.

Therefore, as a response to flocking of Arab youths to soccer matches, the Islamic Movement founded the Islamic League in 1986 as a separate and independent soccer league, with no organizational contact whatsoever with the Israeli League. At first, a few teams were set up by the associations of Young Muslims in the Triangle. Following a successful sports tournament held in Kufr Qassim, a group of leaders, headed by Sheik Hashem Abd el-Rachman, initiated the establishment of a permanent league to be run in the spirit of Islam.

The formation of the Islamic League was preceded by internal arguments within the Islamic Movement. There were those who maintained that the Movement should be investing its energies within the framework of the religion, that is, in *The Da'wa*, the dissemination of Islam. The critics saw the release of urges that makes soccer possible as one of its inherent characteristics, characteristics they thought would corrupt the ranks of the Islamic Movement. Despite these objections, many of the leaders of the Movement were young and came from the generation that had already absorbed soccer as an inseparable part of its culture, and their affection for the game tipped the balance. During the first years of the League, the teams were run without organized funding and relied mainly on contributions. However, as soon as the Islamic Movement attained status among the local authorities, public funding started to flow toward the Islamic League's teams.

One of the ways the Islamic nature of the League found expression was in the teams' names, some of which were based on Islamic myths. For instance, "Hitin" hints at the battle of Hitin, in which Salah al-Din defeated the Crusaders, and "Alburak" is the name of the prophet Mohamad's mythical horse. The Islamic League is not professional, and all activity conducted within it is voluntary. Accordingly, its establishment did not presume to constitute an attractive alternative to the games run by the Israeli Football Association. In fact, in many cases the teams in the Islamic League served as reserve teams for those that played in the Israeli League, with players who had not been selected, yet who wanted to keep up their match fitness, turning up to play. Also, some of the players in the Islamic League were veterans of the Israeli League. This structure preserved the qualitative hierarchy between the two leagues.

In 1996, a schism appeared in the Islamic Movement, the background of which can be found in the parliamentary and prime ministerial elections that took place in the same year. The rupture had repercussions for the Islamic League, which was then divided into two leagues: the Islamic League, run by the southern faction, which in 1999 consisted of 14 teams; and the General Islamic League, run by the

northern faction, and consisting of 19 teams in 1999. The analysis in this article refers to the bigger league of the northern faction.

Formally, the General Islamic League is independently managed, but the Movement's leaders are highly involved. In the northern faction, the deputy head of the Islamic Movement, Sheik Kamal Khatib, regularly participates in meetings, and the principles behind the League's functioning—principles that emphasize moral values above sporting achievement—are largely dictated by him. Furthermore, he or another of the movement's religious leaders opens important games, such as the Islamic League's cup final, with a speech.

The Islamic League also has a representative team that plays against teams from the areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, a team that has even gone on tour in Jordan. Every year, at the end of the soccer season, an exhibition match takes place between the Islamic League's representative team and the Al-Quds team. In contrast to its internal rampart-guarding, externally the Islamic Movement can be seen trying to interest the wider Muslim population in the Islamic League's games. The Movement's sports journalists prepare league tables and reports on the games, and pass them on to the secular *Kul al-Arab* and *A-Sinarah* newspapers. Their sports editors generally publish the Islamic League tables on their pages.

## METHODOLOGY

This article is based on three data sources:

1. Most of the research is based on a content analysis of the sports pages of the *Saut al-haq wal-huria* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the northern faction of the Islamic Movement, from January 1999 to June 2000. The main part of the textual analysis is based on the issues published since 3 March 2000. These issues include a separate sports supplement in which the religious-sporting rhetoric is particularly pronounced and direct.
2. Observation of four Islamic League games (one regular league game, two semi-finals, and the cup final), during which I tried to see how the League's Islamic identity is given voice by the behavior of both the players and the crowd. During the games, I carried out informal discussions with players and officials.
3. Open, face-to-face interviews with five central Islamic League activists and four Islamic Movement member heads of local councils. In the interviews, I tried to clarify the way they perceived the relationship between soccer and Islam. The interviews complement the written texts from the Movement's sports journalism.

As a 30-year-old Jewish Israeli man who speaks Arabic, my presence in the field was far from convenient, because with this profile I could easily be sent by the Israeli General Security Service under the disguise of academic researcher. Thus,

in many cases the suspicion of the people around me was obvious. The implications of this methodological shortcoming in this specific article are minor, because the texts in the newspaper are the basic empirical material, and the interviews served only as support. In addition, impressions from the behavior of the players and audience are possible to obtain anonymously or without self-introduction.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE DISCOURSE AND PRACTICES**

The focus of my discourse analysis is the sports section of the Islamic Movement's northern section's weekly newspaper, *Saut al-hak wal-huria*. From 3 March 2000, the sports section even began to appear as a separate supplement. The supplement's name—*al-Riyada wal-Akhlaq* ("Sports and Morality")—testifies to its pedagogic orientation, as well as to the identity that it is trying to promote. This stands in contrast to names such as "Sports Corner" or "A Week of Sports" that appear in the sports sections of other Arab newspapers (and all the more so with regard to the name of the column of the sports editor of *Kul al-Arab*, "Cocktail," a name that could only be found in a declaredly secular paper). While the tension between the attempt to construct Arab national pride and the desire to present soccer as a potential arena for integration can be felt in the secular Arab press, Islamic newspapers link soccer exclusively to Islamic identity, without referring to the possibility of integration into Israeli society at all.

Additionally, the sports section and the Islamic League can be virtually identified with one another, with the latter constituting almost the only subject written about. Every week, the supplement's front page carries an article, authored each time by a different writer, who is nearly always a religious leader, and whose signature, appearing at the start of the supplement, affords moral legitimacy for the Muslim faithful to read the rest of the supplement.

It is hard to deconstruct the two systems of dialectical opposites that I described at the beginning of this article and to attribute the elements to different speakers or groups. The contradictions and tensions can be found within the words—both spoken and written—of the very same people. The same writer can simultaneously describe soccer as a threat to Islam and as a game that grew out of Islamic tradition. At the very same time, soccer can be presented as a locale for releasing energies and as a site in which temperance and obedience can be learned. Accordingly, the instrumental approach to soccer and the practices resulting from it swing between a desire to supervise a licentious locale, and a perception of soccer itself as a tool for promoting belief in Islam.

This analysis is first organized according to the two relational poles of soccer: as a site of licentiousness and as a natural part of the Islamic religion. Following this, the two possible uses of soccer are discussed, as they are seen by the movement's leadership: an internal use—education toward temperance and obedience; and an external use—soccer in the service of *The Da'wa*, the dissemination of Islam.

## An institution of licentiousness or Islamic tradition?

As a secular and Western institution, soccer is perceived by most writers in the Islamic newspaper's sports supplement as a threat. One can learn of the extent to which part of the Islamic Movement's leadership perceives soccer as destined for disaster, or as an impure institution, from the words of Sheik Muhamad Salah Khatib, the Imam of the New Mosque in El-Uzair. Using the rhetoric of "how much more so...", he explains why it is so important to request forgiveness after a game:

[M]an is quick to forget and quick to sin, so I suggest to my soccer-loving brothers that they are strict in asking forgiveness—especially after each and every game. And who has a greater obligation to request pardon—the Prophet, or he who stands on the pitch, with Allah knowing his situation? Allah the blessed and lofty said to his emissary (Peace be upon him) at the end of his days: "When comes the Help of Allāh and the conquest, and you see that the people enter Allāh's religion in crowds, so glorify the praises of your Lord, and ask for His forgiveness. Verily, He is the One Who accepts the repentance and forgives. . . ." (Qur'anic verses, Surah 110, verses 1–3, T.S.)

In other words, if the Prophet was commanded to ask forgiveness—how much more so must one who has watched a soccer match and has been exposed to all the evils that necessarily attend it. Following the same logic, Sheik Khatib continues:

Also, who has a greater obligation to request forgiveness, the Hajj after the pilgrimage, or the soccer player on his soccer pitch? [Allah] the lofty said to the pilgrims after they had performed the pilgrimage and completed the Hajj, "Then pour out from where the people have poured out, and ask pardon from Allah; Allah is forgiving and compassionate . . ." (Qur'anic verse, Surah 2, verse 195, T.S.). So who has a greater obligation to request pardon? The devotee who stood before his god, or he who spent hours at the soccer pitch and whose qualities were tested? Allah's Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) taught the people that after each written prayer one must thrice request forgiveness from the Lord.

My brothers—how large are our crimes, and what is the extent of our sin at soccer pitches and other places. Never forget to request forgiveness, and the hand of Allah promised that he will never punish you if you ask pardon from him. (*al-Riyada wal-Akhlaq*, 31 May 2000)

"Crimes." "Sins." These are the terms the writer associates with soccer. Soccer's impurity requires of all those who take part in it to request forgiveness after every game, even if the game took place under supervision and received the legitimacy of Islamic religious leaders.

Sometimes, the religious writers of the sports supplement's opening column explicitly disparage toward soccer, thus underscoring their instrumentalist—verging on cynical—approach to the Islamic League:

You who run after “a piece of leather”—that is just a reason and a means, and not an aim—paradise is the only prize—“thus will the competitors compete” (Qur’anic verse, T.S.)—and it is the biggest victory of all, following the will of Allah. I say to the two teams, you must choose—between cleanliness or impurity. (Sheik Hassan Abu-Leil; 10 March 2000)

This is not the only time that the derogatory term, “piece of leather,” is used to refer to the soccer ball. Such explicit disparagement of soccer is only possible in a sports supplement that declares from the outset that the game itself is of no importance. Also, the dichotomous distinction between purity and impurity is fixed according to one’s attitude toward the game. Those who treat the game as a means are pure, whereas those who see it as an end are sinners.

The dialectical position that stands in contrast to the formation of a soccer-Islam opposition is one that adopts soccer, and describes it as a direct continuation of Islamic tradition. In his writings, Sheik Munir Abu-l-Hija describes the two poles together, presenting sports as a direct continuation of Islamic tradition on the one hand, and on the other, expressing concern about the corrupting elements at its foundation. The joint appearance of both of these motifs reflects, to a large extent, the complex attitude of the Islamic Movement’s leadership toward soccer:

It is neither strange nor difficult for he who traces the positions and sayings of the Prophet (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) to discover dozens of sayings that deal with sports and strength. The Prophet (Peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said in the Hadith: “the strong believer is preferred and loved by Allah more than the weak believer.” And we see that the Prophet struggled with an infidel named Rakannah and threw him down. He rode his horse in front of everyone, and advocated horse riding, shooting, and so on—yet despite this we can find him saying—“strength is not in the struggle, but he is strong who controls his anger.” This is a clear and exact instruction from the prophets to all the sportsmen interested in morality and sports, and in improving their behavior while improving their body and strength. ... [W]e do not want sports to become a slippery slope away from the memory of Allah, or a mere amusement (that distances us) from prayer, we do not desire the commercialization and licentiousness that the West wants, where man yearns for richness and fame, even at the expense of mankind’s humanity.

... [A]long with our great love for you, for your sporting hobbies and skills, for the strength of your bodies and the health of your souls, we shall continue to love the integrity of your behavior and character, and the purity of your principles and aims. Not because of enthusiasm, nor courage nor earthly gains. Allah does not look at the form of your bodies, but rather at your hearts and your actions. . . . (21 April 2000)

The verse that the writer quotes from the Hadith—“the strong believer is preferred and loved by Allah more than the weak believer”—is embedded within the discourse of Islamic sports activists, and is often referred to as physical strength, even though it could have other interpretations. The encouragement that appears in Islamic sources to busy oneself with swimming, horse riding, and shooting can

also be interpreted as a practical need to promote fighting skills in a religious community that was born in conditions of war. A certain amount of interpretive acrobatics is required in order to construe it as promoting modern sports, which are characterized by quantitative measurability, as opposed to being directed toward an external aim, such as preparedness for battle. Nonetheless, Sheik Abu-I-hija's invention of tradition demands clarifications, such that no one would understand him to be giving indiscriminate legitimacy to all sports. Sports can also comprise a slippery slope, from the central peak of which (the fulfillment of commandments) the believer can descend into distant and marginal territory located in the West, where sports are necessarily connected with commercialization and licentiousness, and not with godly labor. Another example of this complex attitude can be found in the writings of Sheik Jamal Sa'adi from Iksal:

The Lord forbids Muslims to have dealings with amusements and games, unless they take place within very clear boundaries agreed upon by the religion of Allah and the Islamic Shari'a. There is no disagreement that Islam approves of action, activity, and movement, and calls for its followers to exercise and care for their bodies by swimming, shooting, horse riding, soccer, running, and other permitted activities, and in the past it was said: a healthy soul in a healthy body. But having said that, and bearing in the mind the advances in our bodily health, we have no choice but to raise the level of our morality, whether we are players on the pitch or spectators. It is forbidden for a Muslim to get so angry that he loses his balance and discipline, which immediately leads to an inappropriate loosening of his tongue... [T]here are no winners or losers on the pitch—the defeated and humiliated is, with the help of Allah, Satan, and the winner and victor is good morality and true brotherhood. Make sports into an arena in which the competitors compete for obedience to Allah and for your place in paradise. (*al-Riyada wal-Akhlaq*, 12 May 2000)

In this text, the “invention of a tradition” is expanded upon. Sa'adi interweaves soccer—invented only 150 years ago—into a list of activities that are mentioned in Islamic sources, such as swimming and horse riding, and turns it into an Islamic injunction. At the same time, he adopts a certain degree of caution: Sports can only be permitted after they are removed from the world of amusement and play and defined as a religious obligation.

## **OBEDIENCE, DISCIPLINE, AND TEMPERANCE**

For Sa'adi, one of the central dangers latent in soccer is loss of balance and discipline. In this context, it is worth saying a few words about the connection between sports, discipline, and temperance. Elias and Dunning (1986: 63–90) explain the appearance of modern sports as a side effect of the ever-increasing restraints required by British society in the age of modernity. These restrictions led to the need for the creation of a social enclave in which moderated and permissible forms of excitement and enjoyment could be aroused and expressed. Leaning on psycho-

analytic logic, they claim that the creation of sports allowed the necessary release of violent urges in a framework both supervised and limited in terms of time and space.

A striking foundation of the Islamic Movement is its increasing supervision of public expressions of emotion and urges. The same ascetic basis of Islamic fundamentalism that demands that weddings be uprooted from traditional customs of happiness is that which can be seen trying to detach sports from its function as a safety valve for the release of violent urges. The crowd's swearing and cursing are an inseparable part of the desired "letting off of steam," but it is clear that that is not the purpose that the Islamic Movement designated to soccer. On the contrary, temperance, restraint, and control over one's urges become of import in their own right, and the passing of a soccer match without such releases as discussed above becomes an end in itself. The Islamic values glorified by the organizers of the Islamic League are reflected in terms that are regularly found in the opening column of the sports section, terms such as patience, forbearance, conquering anger, obedience, balance, and discipline. Consider the following: if the Islamic League is the site in which the restraining force of Islam comes into conflict with the recalcitrant, rebellious nature of sports, and if the League's aim is to strengthen Islamic values, then only by moderating urges and violence in such a way as to differentiate it from other soccer environments can the League justify its existence.

The objective of restraint and obedience is given a two-directional expression in the way soccer is represented. On the one hand, because of the temptation to release one's urges, soccer is a test of self-restraint, and therefore also a test of faith. On the other hand, certain of the characteristics of a soccer match are represented as an idealistic metaphor for the hierarchy of the religious organization, and the hierarchy between man and god. Below is an excerpt from my interview with Sheik Kamel Rayan from Kufr Barrah, one of the leaders of the Islamic Movement's southern faction:

Religious belief has influence over the game, and the game is a test of religious belief: can I really bear the discipline, the obedience. Also, everyone knows his place. There is a hierarchy—that is how the religion is built too, and also the religious organization. It is not something liberal, where everyone can just do whatever he wants.

Just as one who wants to construct a civic identity around soccer emphasizes the joint agreement of the rules of the game, so too the Islamic Movement, keen as it is to strengthen Islam, emphasizes accepting the rules and instructions as dictated by an unquestionable external power. The motif of obedience repeatedly appears in the sports supplement in different guises:

One of the most important factors in the success of a people, a nation, a movement, and a party is the principle of obedience to the ruler, obedience to the leader. In our

religion, obeying the leader is an obligation which man must heartily imbibe, and he who transgresses will be accordingly blamed.

(At this point the writer presents a number of verses from the Qur'an and the Hadith that justify the importance he attributes to obedience. He also produces a number of historical examples of Islamic failures that followed a failure to obey the leader.)

[T]he player on the pitch must accept the instructions of his coach, for disobeying them will bring defeat upon his team, and he will have to pay the price of punishment, whatever that may be. . . . One of the most important characteristics that makes the youth playing in the Islamic League unique is his obedience to the referee and the sporting spirit, which emanates from him and influences his fellow brothers. (Sheik Issam Hassan Dakhla, *A-Riyada wal-Akhlaq*, 5 May 2000)

The Islamic League's *raison d'être* can be clearly seen in the above text: to morally distinguish it from regular soccer, and to set an example for it. A player in the Islamic League has lofty values, of which obedience is a central one, and it is expected of him to influence those in his environment.

The emphasis on obedience and temperance clashes with the widely accepted perception of sports' functions. Competitive sports within the framework of leisure time falls into the category of what Elias and Dunning call "mimetic activities," which create excitement via the construction of tension (Elias and Dunning 1986: 75). Excitement and tension find expression not only in obeying the laws of the game, but also in pushing them to their limits, or, as it is called in sports journalism, unsporting behavior: little pushes, even when the player does not have the ball; exaggerated pleadings to the referee; open displays of hostility to the opposing team's fans. The hard-core fans' behavioral metamorphosis gives the game part of its ritual feel (Bromberger 1995), including a temporary adoption of improper behavior. On an individual level, the hard-core sports fan's experience is not complete if he cannot curse to his heart's content. The Islamic League presumes to wipe out all of those elements from the game, to do away with swearing, to remove displays of hostility between the teams, yet nonetheless to put on a game of soccer and arouse interest in it. How can the contradiction be straightened out? How can excitement and tension be created while canceling out all excess, all emotional extremities, and the feeling that soccer is an end in itself?

In order to deal with these difficulties, much effort is expended in making the soccer field an "Islamic space." Creating this defined Islamic space has value in and of itself in constructing Islamic identity, but it also serves to signify to all involved that the expectations of their behavior are entirely different from those regarding any other game of soccer. The Islamic nature of the game finds expression in a number of elements:

1. The games start and finish with the two teams standing in the middle of the field and crying out “*Allah Akbar*” (Allah is great). At certain times during the match, either before the game or in the half-time interval, the players, coaches, and managers join together in prayer. At the cup final, a game I attended, the gates were at the time of prayer so that the (four hundred or so) fans could also join in. At the end of the games, all the players meet together to hear a sermon.
2. The players play in long trousers, even on hot summer days. The claim that bodily activity does not stand at the center of the game is strengthened by the players’ covering up of their bodies, and the consequent lack of comfort fortifies the ascetic dimension of the Islamic experience.
3. If the Muezzin’s call to prayer is heard from a nearby mosque, the game is halted for a few minutes. In this way, the mosque penetrates the soccer field.
4. The only flags waved by the fans are those of the “Shahadatin” – green flags, imprinted with Islamic verses—known as the flag of Islam. In contrast to the chants heard in the Israeli League, which are mostly in Hebrew, the repertoire at Islamic League games is taken mainly from the Egyptian League or is based on variations of Islamic slogans. For instance, “There is no god apart from Allah, and Majd loves Allah”—a chant shouted by the fans of the *Majd el-krum* team—is actually a paraphrase of the sentence: “There is no god apart from Allah, and Mohamed is his Prophet.”
5. There is a strict set of regulations regarding disciplinary transgressions. The use of offensive comments by players to one another is forbidden by the regulations of the Islamic League, and is punishable by expulsion from the League. Particularly serious offenses require permission to be given by religious leaders before the recalcitrant player is allowed to play again.
6. The players’ behavior is actively supervised by the crowd and the bureaucrats. When a player knocks over another player and emotions threaten to boil over, both teams’ benches, as well as part of the crowd, immediately start enacting the script to be employed in occasions such as these by crying “*Allah akbar wa-l’illah al-hamd!*” (Allah is great, all praise to Allah), which reminds the players that they are currently in an Islamic space, and that they therefore must behave with restraint. Such events usually end with the players shaking hands, and not pushing each other or uttering swearwords.

The Islamic definition of the situation is not always maintained. In the semi-final game between *Majd Alkrum* and *Bua’ina/Uzeir*, tension was running particularly high. More than once players tackled fiercely, which almost led to an outburst. The crowd duly and faithfully played its part. Instead of encouraging the players to be forceful, or even violent, as is usually the case at soccer matches, the fans cried out: “*wihda islamia – Majdiya – Uzeiriya*,” meaning, “Islamic unity – Majd (Alkrum) and Uzeir.” These cries were accompanied by chants of “*Allah akbar*” from the benches, and the tension was diffused.

## SOCCKER IN THE SERVICE OF THE *DA'WA*

The movement's leaders do not see the Islamic League as an end in itself, but rather as a tool for advancing The *Da'wa*, and as a moral alternative to the extremely popular Israeli League. Accordingly, an oft-repeated motif is that the players' attitude toward moral values is more important than their sporting skills.

Salah Lutfi from Um al-Fahm is responsible for "Youth and Sports" in the Islamic Movement. For him, the relationship between the two spheres is taken for granted: both "Youth" and "Sports" indicate the educational function of sports. "Soccer is just a way-station," says Lutfi. "Sports can help achieve Islamic educational aims." Lutfi is not only referring to the games of the Islamic League. In 1994, the Islamic Movement set up a soccer school in Um Al-Fahm. Before playing, the children read from the Qur'an and pray. Lutfi explains: "There are children who don't pray, and we say that it will come with time, we don't force them." The Islamic League is open to all Muslims, regardless of their lifestyle off the soccer field, and, indeed, the gap between the religiosity of the leaders and officials and that of the players is a striking phenomenon. My impression from discussions I had with players is that many of them come to play soccer—and not to take part in a religious event—and that large numbers of them do not participate in the Movement's other activities. This discrepancy fits the leadership's perception that soccer can serve as a tool for disseminating Islam to people who would not otherwise be reached by it were it not for soccer.

Sheik Kamal Khatib, deputy leader of the Islamic Movement (northern section), wrote a column in the first expanded sports supplement, published on 3 March 2000, in which he summarized his instrumentalist view of soccer:

We must say to our brothers, whatever their activity and position may be in relation to The *Da'wa*, that they must guard and defend those positions more than the goal-keeper guards his goal, that we will defend our The *Da'wa*, we will support it and give it our backs to rest on with more skill than that of a defender. We will act to present our ideas and to bring our The *Da'wa* to everybody with more enthusiasm and true will than those of an attacker running after the ball, trying to reach it so as to score a beautiful goal.

Your efforts will be blessed, brothers, as you strengthen the fortress of your The *Da'wa*, along with your brothers and sisters. A blessing upon you, brothers of the General Islamic League for Sports, blessings upon the Saut al-Hak wal-Huria, blessings upon you all... (*Al-Riyada wal-Akhlaq*, 3 March 2000)

In contrast to secular sports supplements, in which political messages are hidden between the lines written by sports journalists, in the *Saut elhak* newspaper the central commentaries and interpretations are written by politicians and religious leaders. While secular papers use political contexts as a metaphor for describing a game of soccer, in the excerpt above we can see Sheik Kamal Khatib using soccer as a metaphor for political-religious activity. This distinction nicely

reflects soccer's relative place and intended role in each one of the streams. The attitude of the Islamic Movement's leadership to soccer is declaredly instrumentalist, and no interest in the game itself is expressed.

Our dealings with sports, and the existence of the Islamic League and the teams that comprise it, are part of our Islamic The *Da'wa*, through which we call people to the religion of Allah, make it approachable for the people, and bring them closer to Islam. Allah revealed this means to us, and through it we cause youth to want Islam, and urge and encourage them to want to praise Allah. (Sheik Ahmed Rashed, *Al-Riyada wal-Akhlaq*, 26 May 2000)

Through sports, claims the writer, Islamic Movement activists *make approachable, bring closer, urge, and encourage*—expressions that indicate an active missionary attitude, which is served by sports. Diya a-Din Abu Ahmed, the Imam of a mosque in Nazareth, speaks in similar terms. Under the headline, "This is our Aim," he wrote in the sports supplement:

Everybody knows that this is our aim—to make soccer a tool for desiring Allah, and winning a place in paradise—and not so that people will point at us and say that we are professionals and skilled on the soccer pitch. We want people to point to our morals, to our patience and temperance, to our conquering of anger, and to our joint responsibility, to our adherence and obedience, and also to our unity as one body, such that if one part is in pain, the rest of the body jumps to assistance to guard and protect it. (*Al-Riyada wal-Akhlaq*, 28 April 2000)

It is important to pay attention to Abu Ahmed's outward-looking orientation. The Islamic League is not only meant to serve as an alternative model of morality, but also to be seen from the outside as a role model worthy of imitation: "We want people to point at our morals."

For those representing the Islamic League as a tool for The *Da'wa*, it is only one part of a larger educational project, but it is a particularly sensitive and dangerous part that demands special attention. Sheik Jalal A-din Zu'abi, the Imam of the Ot'man mosque in Kafr Kanna, writes:

I have a number of hopes and desires regarding the Islamic League:

1. That the Islamic League's activity will include educational and spiritual themes—that it will not just remain in the sphere of soccer—and that there will be many lectures, clubs, lessons, hikes, and so on.
2. That the correct sporting spirit, mutual bonds, and true cooperation will reign between the players during competitions, without them becoming a source of hostility, mutual hatred, animosity, and lack of restraint.
3. That adherents of the Islamic religion—people who are committed to the principles of faith, the practices, the traditions, the morals, the prayer, and the attitude of Islam—will be appointed to the leadership and management of the League's activities, and that they will plant love for goodness and fine morals in the souls

of the young, and that they will make them keep the rules of the correct Islam, and distance themselves from all evil.

4. These educators must be of faith and good intention and must be able to bear the heavy responsibility placed on their shoulders. They must learn the ways of Mustapha, peace be upon him, and follow in his footsteps so that they will be able to bring the nation's young to the level of which they are worthy. (*Al-Riyada wal-Akhlaq*, 15 May 2000)

These lines once more demonstrate the secondary place given to soccer. On the one hand, it is an educational tool (like the clubs and hikes), but on the other, there is a considerable concern with soccer's potential to become an arena for the release of urges. Therefore, strict supervision by carefully selected and authorized supervisory agents is required. After all, they must take care of a rampaging monster, and not everyone has the skills required to tame it. From this it follows that they must be "committed to Islam," and "able to bear the heavy responsibility placed on their shoulders." Apart from the stifled criticism of some of the Islamic League's activists, whom the writer suspects are true soccer fans and not faithful enough to Islam, the writer's comments bring home the fear of a blurring of the boundaries, and of the danger that, in the heat of the game, the original purpose, the reason for which the League was set up, will be forgotten.

The emphasis placed on the players' morality is also reflected in the Islamic League's rulebook. Alongside the regular league table, which shows the teams' points according to the results of their games, one can always find a "table of morality" in which the teams are ranked by the fair play of their players. "Fair play tables" of this kind are found in every soccer league, but in the Islamic League the two tables are not independent. Having particularly low points in the morality table influences the team's points in the regular table. The supplement's headlines and articles treat this table with almost the same level of importance as they do the regular points table. The paper's editors even claim that sports supplements covering the Israeli League learned to present such fair play tables from them. This claim does not stand the test of simple chronology, yet it tells us something about the way that Islamic Movement activists see themselves as offering a universalist moral alternative. Furthermore, one could say that the attempt to quantify and measure moral values presents us with the essence of the synthesis borne of the dialectic between sports and religion.

## CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

There is a basic difference between an identity based on a cultural or sacred code (such as Muslim identity as it is interpreted by the Islamic movement) and a Palestinian identity based on primordial code. The nationalist ideology of "Palestinianness" assumes the existence of an innate inherited identity. Language and consciousness are important elements in national identity, yet a Palestinian who denies his Palestinianness is seen by his environment as living in a state of

false consciousness, and there is no way of becoming a Palestinian. On the contrary, Islamic identity as it is interpreted by the Islamic movement has permeable boundaries: Joining Islam is easy, and Islam has a strong proselytizing foundation. Because of its reliance on moral principles, Islam does not share the egalitarian orientation to be found in nationalist ideologies. One can be “more Muslim” or “less Muslim” according to the level of one’s commitment to the religion’s principles. A hierarchical structure and diffuse boundaries are the outstanding characteristics of an identity based on a code of sacredness (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1994).

Having said that, the boundaries of Islamic identity are permeable in both directions. Because Islam does not rely on an internal essence, exposure to a strong, hegemonic culture is seen as an existential threat. Hence, non-Islamic behavior is heretical and distances one from the fulfillment of all of the commandments. Therefore, while nationalist identities need competitive meetings against other nations in order to seemingly expose their true nature, the Islamic Movement’s encounter with hegemonic Israeli society actually constitutes an existential threat. It is understood as an intercultural encounter with unequal starting conditions, such that it could lead to the negation of the Islamic identity of those taking part in it.

Due to soccer’s overwhelming popularity the Islamic Movement could not boycott it. Alternatively, it incorporated soccer into its activities, and attempted to Islamicize the game and use it for its own purposes. The Islamic Movement’s choice of incorporating soccer and turning it into a tool for proving the moral superiority of Islam inevitably produce various tensions. These tensions are inevitable because at least some of the features of soccer that elicited the initial antagonism have not simply disappeared after its adoption by the Islamic Movement. Soccer is a quasi-religious institution that entails some very earthly orientations such as simple amusement. It also entails obvious materialistic orientations such as celebrating physical performances, serving as a model for professional success, and even supplying commercial opportunities—all considered by the Islamic Movement as corrupting if they stand as goals in and of themselves. By creating a separate league, the Islamic Movement has managed to eliminate the worship of professionalism and commercialism but not the pure amusement and the importance of physical performance. These vital components of the sportive experience are crucial for seducing young players to join the league, but they remain subject to consistent criticism by the political-religious leaders.

Another major source of tension stems from modern sports’ capacity to supply an answer for people’s “quest for excitement,” to use the famous title of Elias and Dunning (1986). Sports, they noted, serves as a social enclave that permits moderate, “civilised” forms of aggression. The regulation of emotions and the subjugation of aggression to a certain system of rules are essential to soccer itself, but the sporadic violations of these rules are necessary to reaffirm them. However, the Islamic League’s managers even argue that they are able to eliminate these deviations, namely, any expression of aggression and anger. As Sheik Jamal Sa’adi wrote, warning about the danger hidden in the soccer game: “It is forbidden for a Muslim

to get so angry that he loses his balance and discipline.”

At first glance, the excitement and aggression inherent to soccer confront the declared aspiration of the Islamic Movement to control emotions and discipline them. However, these very elements are those that enable the Islamic Movement to utilize the game by turning soccer into a challenge of self-control. In addition, the hierarchical structure of soccer and the necessity of obeying the coach enable it to be used as an exercise in obedience, simulating the relations between men and God. Soccer, hence, is transformed into a tool of religious education, an ideal scene for practicing temperance and obedience.

Nevertheless, hesitation and ambiguities are present. They appear in the way the games are run, and in the way the movement's leaders try to represent the game to themselves and their followers. How should the game be represented? As a secular Western institution that poses a threat to the purity of Islamic morals, but which Islam nonetheless succeeds in controlling, or as the natural and logical progression of Islamic tradition? As a site that encourages the release of urges, or as a location in which to teach restraint, temperance, and obedience?

The Islamic League is still in its developmental stages. The extended sports supplement of the *Saut al-haq* paper that started to appear in March 2000, and the sports and religious rhetoric that appears in it, comprise a meaningful point of departure with regard to the ways the Islamic Movement deals with soccer. Because this constitutes a fascinating test case of the relations between sports and religion, a future research project taking into account the dimension of time in analyzing the discourse and the way it develops will most certainly be in order.

## NOTES

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1. On 30 March 1976, a violent protest against governmental land expropriation resulted in the killing of six Palestinians (five of whom were Israeli citizens) by Israeli police. Since then, March 30 has become the central date for celebrating national solidarity among all the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel.

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