

Foul Play in Soccer

Soccer is a great sport and the international football competition hosted by the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA), located in Zurich, every four years is the most watched sporting event in the world. The soccer world has now been disgraced and dishonored in two ways, by the inherent corruption among FIFA officials, and by the effort of Palestinians to politicize the organization.

On May 1, 2015 Jibril Rajoub, president of the Palestinian Football Association and deputy secretary of the Fatah Central Committee, announced he would present a resolution on May 29 to the Congress of FIFA. The resolution would call for Israel to be suspended or expelled from FIFA's governing body. This would mean that Israel would not be able to compete in the Euro qualifiers and its clubs could not participate in European or international competition.

No doubt there have been some minor problems concerning permits for Palestinians to travel. But the whole issue has nothing to do with competitive soccer. It is another missile aimed by Palestinians and their supporters at isolating and vilifying Israel and internationalizing their effort to achieve statehood. It is part of the Palestinian policy of "internationalism," bringing all alleged grievances of Israel into all international arenas.

A vote to suspend by FIFA has been done only twice before, in the case in the 1960s of apartheid South Africa that had refused to comply with nondiscrimination policies of FIFA, and in the case of Yugoslavia, then led by Slobodan Milosevic, for a short time in May 1992. Israel has not violated any FIFA rules. The result of the suspension would have been that Israel, which is affiliated to the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) could not compete in the 2016 qualifiers, and its clubs would be barred from European competition.

The FIFA President, Sepp Blatter, who has held that position since 1998, was uncharacteristically blunt about the issue, regarding the proposed resolution as an abuse of FIFA statutes. He tried to reach a compromise to avoid a vote. Believing that football has the power to connect people, he wanted to build bridges by proposing a game between the two teams to be played in Zurich, Switzerland.

The Palestinians refused his proposal, reiterating their complaint that Israel was guilty of humiliating treatment of Palestinians by Israeli security and border forces as involves restricted movements of Palestinian players, staff, and officials between the West Bank and Gaza as well as for those travelling to international matches. They had other complaints. Another was FIFA had hindered the establishment of Palestinian soccer clubs in East Jerusalem by refusing permits for visits of foreign delegations. A third is that Israel limits the import of sports equipment into Palestinian territories.

The most serious Palestinian argument was that five teams in the Israeli Football Association based in the settlements should be expelled from the league.

The Israeli position, stated by IFA President Ofer Eini, was that the restrictions on movement were needed for security reasons. The Israel FA has no influence over them and had nothing to do with them. The Israelis in 2015 have in fact approved 95% of the requests for travel permits. Nevertheless, Rajoub declared that Israeli "security should not be used ...as a tool in order to keep this racist, apartheid policies."

At the FIFA Congress on May 29, 2015 pro-Palestinian demonstrators, chanting "Israel out" disrupted the meeting. Nevertheless, at the last minute Rajoub withdrew the motion to suspend Israel, "at any rate for the present," explaining that this "did not mean that I give up the resistance."

The central factor in the whole issue is that Rajoub has been more concerned with political strategy than with sport. At the age of 17 he threw a grenade at an Israeli truck near Hebron, and was imprisoned for 18 years. He was one of the 1150 Palestinian prisoners released in the deal on May 21, 1985 for the three Israeli soldiers held by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. Since 2009 he has been deputy secretary of the Fatah Central Committee and has made belligerent statements. He refers to Israelis as "the new Nazis," and still calls for resistance "in the occupied territories in order to bring an end to the occupation using all forms of resistance. One of his reported remarks was, "I swear that if we had a nuke, we'd have used it this very morning."

Rajoub has joined in the anti-Israeli, and indeed anti-Semitic charade that the situation in the West Bank was far worse than the apartheid that existed in South Africa. His political decision in August 13, 2014 is "using all forms of resistance in the occupied territories in order to bring an end to the occupation." Under no circumstances, Rajoub stated on May 17, 2012 will "there be normalization" with Israel.

The Palestinian threat has been a minor part of the storm and devastating blow to the soccer world. FIFA is facing two criminal investigations. On May 26, 2015 Swiss police arrested seven FIFA officials, including three present or past vice presidents, at the request of the U.S. They now face extradition. The U.S. Department of Justice, by U.S. law, has authority to indict foreign nationals living abroad, an authority that has been used in cases of international terrorism. Switzerland will start an inquiry, a criminal probe concerning criminal mismanagement and money laundering, about the selection of Russia (for 2018) and Qatar (for 2022) to host World Cup competitions.

At the same time the U.S. Department of Justice drew up a 47 count, 161-page indictment against 9 current or former FIFA

officials and five others, and mentioned 25 other co-conspirators in a federal court in Brooklyn. The indictment involves \$150 million in bribes and kickbacks, dating back to 1991, given to FIFA officials in exchange for commercial rights to soccer tournaments. Federal prosecutors will begin criminal proceedings, for criminal mismanagement and money laundering concerning FIFA's awarding of the World Cups to Russia in 2018 and to Qatar in 2022. The choice of Qatar, questionable because of its political system and its temperature over 100 degrees in summer, raised obvious questions.

Among the sponsors of FIFA are Adidas, McDonald's, Budweiser, Coca Cola, Gazprom, and Visa. Those commercial enterprises likely will refuse to be tarnished any longer by association with a corrupt organization. Nor are they likely to have approved the use of FIFA for Palestinian political objectives. Like every lover and supporter of soccer, they will welcome the decision of Rajoub to drop the bid to suspend Israel from FIFA. Play ball is better than foul play.

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