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## **Palestinian Football and National Identity under Occupation**

If you degrade the national team, you degrade the idea that there could ever be a nation.

Dave Zirin, 2014

Informed by nationalism, ethnicity, and religion, the on-going conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is one of the most deep-rooted and contentious in the modern era. It is a struggle for the same territory, with Zionism seeking to establish 'Eretz Israel'<sup>1</sup> and Palestinians seeking to recover and establish their own homeland. National and international sporting competitions have become important sites in establishing, maintaining and celebrating expressions of national identity and nationhood. The aims of this article are to show how sport and national identity are manifest in Palestinian football, the difficulties faced by Palestinian footballers, and how football is being used to draw attention to the Palestinian struggle for a homeland. It begins with a brief outline of the origins of the Israel/Palestine conflict and of Palestinian national identity. A brief summary of the literature on sport, football and national identity is given before outlining the history of Palestinian football. The article then discusses contemporary issues within Palestinian society, before examining the actions of the Israeli state in limiting the development of Palestinian football. Support for Palestinians from non-Palestinians is noted before concluding with the suggestion that football represents a promising opportunity to promote Palestine on an international stage. The intention is to stimulate a discussion on the role of football for a people under occupation.

### **Nationalism and sport**

Nationalism is a highly contested ideology with a growing polarisation of nationalism in practice. Essentially a modern movement, nationalism is predicated on the ideas of self-governance, self-determination and the idea that the nation state is a natural source of political power (Anderson, 2006; Hobsbawm, 1990; Smith, 2010). The key mechanisms through which national identity are created and maintained are the promotion of a shared history, political system, language, culture, religion, and sport (Bairner, 2001; Smith and Porter 2004).

On the one hand, progressive nationalism is posited on universalism and human rights, seeing itself as adapting to a more fluid, multicultural, pluralist society and a post-national ideology supportive of immigration. On the other hand, there has been a rise in populist, chauvinistic forms of nationalism, which is increasingly hostile towards ‘multiculturalism’ and calls for ‘managed migration’ to address perceived threats to national security and a singular national identity. The emergence of these neo-fascist forms of nationalism (as that promoted by the Front National in France, the Alternative for Germany Party, the Jobbic Party in Hungary, and in the UK by groups such as National Action, Britain First, UKIP and the EDL), all of whom ‘blame the immigrant’ (Aksan and Bailes, 2017; Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Tenhold, 2018). The political left has traditionally viewed expressions of nationalism in a negative light, interpreting such manifestations as atavistic and sinister. However, nationalism and national identity can be used for other purposes. There are benign expressions of nationalism, with some claiming it is ‘natural’ for people to love their country, and that promoting loyalty to one’s country generates a sense of belonging and allegiance. For the Palestinian people, the concept and expression of a national identity is essential in their struggle to secure their human rights and a homeland.

Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) and Anderson (2006) have shown how the nation is a ‘community writ large’, which cultivates and celebrates its civic rituals and symbols, history, landscape, architecture, food, music, art, literature, flag, national anthem, statues, shrines and coinage, and the honouring of military and national heroes. While there is the suggestion that mainstream commentators on nationalism often paid little attention to sport (Smith and Porter, 2004), Bairner (2015) suggests sport offers multiple opportunities to create and foster a sense of nationhood with greater interest being shown in how sports events can act as sites for the construction, expression or (re)imagining of national identity and national heroes. One productive strand of research on sport and national identity can be found in studies on the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and its role within Ireland and for the Irish diaspora in ‘imagining Irishness’ (Darby, 2010; Harkin, 2018; O’Boyle and Kearns, 2017; for non-GAA studies on sport and national identity see Allen, 2013; Hassan, 2013; Tomlinson and Young, 2006; Wenner and Billings, 2017).

While Smith and Porter (2004) noted the relationship between national identity and sport was multi-faceted and complex, there has been growing recognition that sport offers a valuable stage for those ‘without a country’ and/or those seeking recognition for their small or nascent nation (Sterchele, 2013; Brentin, 2013; Menary, 2007). Smith and Porter (2004) concluded that

certain sports were more effective than others in serving as cultural signifiers of national identity and where there was a minority or oppressed group, sport offered a unique platform upon which to mobilise.

Anderson (2006) proposed that all nations are imagined or constructed upon a sense of national identity which combines invented traditions and popular mythologies. A national sports team can act as an important display of/for such 'invented traditions' and unrealised fantasies. Hobsbawm (1990) applied Anderson's work to sport and claimed the cultural production of football seizes the popular imagination more effectively than other activities in the realms of political and cultural construction. Sport produces powerful nationalistic tendencies with Hobsbawm (1990: 143) suggesting that,

What has made sport so uniquely effective a medium for inculcating national feelings, at all events for males, is the ease with which even the least political or public individuals can identify with the nation as symbolized by young persons excelling at what practically every man wants, or at one time in his life has wanted, to be good at. The imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people.

Sport, as a proxy battlefield, predates the establishment of the State of Israel and the Palestine National Authority (Galily and Ben-Porat, 2008; Sorek, 2007), with international Association Football (hereafter 'football') becoming an increasingly important site for Palestinians, and their supporters, to bring attention to their struggle for nationhood. For Palestinians, the embodiment of their nation in a national sports team, particularly its football team, competing at an international sports event, is an essential ingredient in their sense of nationhood. Research on international sport as expressions of '90-minute patriotism' (Vincent, Kian, and Pedersen 2011; Ward, 2009) cannot be applied to the Palestinians, because their nation's sports teams, especially their successes, represent much, much more than 90 minutes.

### **The origins of the Palestine/Israel conflict**

It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a full explanation of the historical context that surrounds the fractious relationship between the Israeli state and the Palestinians. In his work in the region Sugden (2010) concluded that the deep-roots of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict required an objective outline of only those socio-political and demographic features which

pertain to the issue/s under discussion. As historian James Joll (cited in Bregman, 2014) has advocated, including a narrative history is necessary to provide the reader with the sequence of events and a chart with which to navigate.<sup>2</sup> What is without doubt is that the situation is nuanced, complex and multi-dimensional.

After the defeat of Turkey in World War One and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France ‘carved up’ much of the Middle East (Barr, 2012; Rogan, 2016), created new borders and appointed their preferred candidates to run the newly created nations. Britain’s involvement, via the Balfour Declaration, the Sykes/Picot agreement, and Mandate (1920-1948) took control of Palestine, only to become increasingly mired in the politics of the region and eventually passed responsibility to the United Nations (UN) (Barr, 2012; Schneer 2011; Segev 2001). In 1947 the UN drew up a partition plan that divided Palestine into two states. The day after the UN Resolution was approved, a civil war began which led to the declaration of the State of Israel on May 14th, 1948, an event remembered as ‘Al Nakba’ (*the catastrophe*) by the displaced Palestinians. In 1949 a ceasefire was established but there continued an exodus of Palestinian refugees to neighbouring countries, the Gaza Strip<sup>3</sup> and the area to the west of the River Jordan (i.e. the West Bank). Those who fled during the conflict were, and remain, unable to return to their homes (Pappe, 2007). The situation was compounded by the 1967 (‘Six Day’) war and the continued colonization of Palestinian land (Abunimah, 2014; Pappé, 2011).

Zionism was founded on the belief that a Jewish (only) state is necessary for the survival of the Jewish people. As a political ideology and movement, it has negligible links to orthodox Jewish faith, but is premised on land/territory and views the Jewish people as both a religious and national group with a right to national self-determination (Avineri, 2017; Kelemen, 2012; Rose, 2004; Stanislawski 2016). The decline in imperialism and empire throughout the twentieth-century has left Israel as one of the few settlement colonies that rejects indigenous rights (Sand 2012; 2014). The ‘Jewish only’ ideology has led to Israel being labelled as an apartheid state with the appellation ‘ethnic democracy’ or ‘ethnocracy’ seen as being more accurate than ‘liberal democracy’. The existence of Palestinians continues to shape Israeli state policy with many scholars concluding that Israel is a ‘settler colonial’ society. According to Salamanca et al (2012) the settler colonial structures that underpin the Israeli state must be central to understand the continuing subjection of Palestinians (be they inside Israel, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories or in the diaspora).

Today, there are different Palestinian communities, be they based in Israel, in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (hereafter OPT), or living as refugees in neighbouring countries or in the wider Palestinian diaspora.<sup>4</sup> Israel took control of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights after the 1967 war; some view this as fulfilling a biblical destiny to colonise Judea and Samaria, while others view it as a ‘cursed victory’ (Bregman, 2014). Approximately three million Palestinians live in the West Bank and two million in the Gaza Strip.<sup>5</sup> Between 17% and 20% of Israel’s population is identified as Israeli-Arab, depending if one includes Palestinians living in East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. Although the majority of Palestinians are (Sunni) Muslim, there are some 170,000 Christian Palestinians and 140,000 Druze. There is extensive debate about whether the Palestinians constitute a defined ethnic group with the Western media often portraying Palestinians as Muslims, negating the fact they might be Muslim, Christian or Druze (Said, 2003). There have been attempts by Zionists to define Palestinians as either ‘Arab’ (on the grounds that “they can go and live in another Arab country”) or as Muslims (allowing the Israeli state to garner Western support against Muslim/Islamic extremism). Compared with other human rights issues, the ‘Palestinian Question’ is premised on a territorial dispute, rather than a racial/ethnic issue. There are increasing attempts by the Israeli state to make ‘ethnicity’ the crux of the debate because it allows them to accuse those who support the Palestinians and who question the actions of the Israeli state to be seen as anti-Semitic.

Israel is constitutionally defined as both a Jewish and democratic state, but this definition becomes problematic when considering the significant differences in the rights accorded to the various ethnic groups within Israel (Beinart 2013; Shindler 2015; White 2011). In order to ensure that Israel remains a Jewish (only) state, different legal structures have been developed with Jews having collective rights while minorities (i.e. Christian and Muslim Palestinians) holding only individual rights (Turner, 2015). The Israeli state has increasingly introduced legislation that discriminates against the native Palestinian population, including control over individual movement, collective punishments, and restricted access to land, water, health and education.

The Palestinians moved from an armed struggle to civil protests, *Intifadas* (uprisings), between 1987-1993 and 2000-2005. This change in tactics saw them gain international public support with much of it orientated around the nonviolent Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanction (BDS) movement (Bakan and Abu-Laban, 2009; Barghouti, 2011; Lim, 2012; Wiles, 2013). Symbols are essential in creating and maintaining a sense of national identity, which for the Palestinians

includes their food and music (Hass, 2013), heroes and heroines (Khalili 2009; Tobin, 2016). Palestinian culture is not significantly different from other contemporary national cultures in that sport in general, and football in particular, is part of its national cultural identity. For the Palestinians, the success of the men's national football team has contributed to the embodiment and promotion of a national consciousness and is used to generate greater international support for their human rights.

Shor and Yonay (2010) have explored how sport can bring together Arab and Jewish communities. At the same time, football was shown to reflect and maintain the dominance of the wider Israel-Jewish society. They found Israeli Palestinian football players were consistently monitored and silenced in the Jewish-dominated media discourse. A particular ethno-Jewish discourse dominated in Israeli media which was coupled to an expectation that 'foreign' footballers, particularly if they were not Jewish, should continually express their loyalty to the Israeli state. As a result, although Arabs played in Israeli teams, they were blocked from using their sporting success to express the public presence of Arabs in Israel (Shor and Yoney, 2010; see also Sorek, 2007). Despite increasing levels of racism amongst sections of the country's football fans (Ben-Porat, 2008; 2016), Arab-Israelis have played for the Israeli national team and made an important, if not always respected, contribution (Gilmore, 2005). For Palestinian Israeli sports fans an uneasiness exists if they support Israeli teams with Sorek (2016) noting the Israeli national football team (including its kit colours, shirt badges, and national anthem) cannot be isolated from the other state symbols that reflect Zionism. There have been attempts to build bridges between Israeli and Palestinian youngsters in Northern Israel with extensive commentary available on the work of the 'Football 4 Peace' (F4P) project (Caudwell, 2007; Schulenkorf & Sugden, 2011; 2016; Schulenkorf, Sugden & Burdsey, 2013; Sugden, 2006; 2008; 2010; 2012; Sugden & Wallis, 2007), although such attempts to use Sport for Peace in this conflict have been criticised (see Dart, forthcoming).

Palestine has never been a defined nation state in the modern, Westphalian sense, with the written history of sport in Palestine primarily couched within an Israeli state-building narrative. Sport, as a twentieth century phenomenon, has its history in 'Palestine' located in the 'Yishuv'<sup>6</sup> (Harif & Galily, 2003; Kaufman & Galily, 2007, 2009). The history of Palestinian sport is limited, due in part to the systematic destruction of historical and cultural records linked to the Palestinian people; as Chomsky (1999) has noted, there has been a deliberate attempt to render Palestine and Palestinians invisible. While some newspaper reports from the 1930s and the 1940s have been identified (Sorek, 2000, 2013), Khalidi (2012) showed there were some 65



social athletic clubs operating in Palestine prior to 1948, most of which were affiliated to the Arab Palestine Sports Federation.

### **Palestine, Football and FIFA**

The first Palestinian Football Association was founded in Mandatory Palestine in 1928 with the Zionist Maccabi sports organization subsequently applying for, and securing membership, to FIFA (Mendel, 2017).<sup>7</sup> The Palestinian Football Association operated a local league structure comprising nine Jewish clubs and one British (police) club in the top-tier with Arab clubs restricted to the secondary league. Arab football clubs participated in the league until 1934, when they left to establish a parallel Arab football league. The two leagues operated separately until 1948 ('War of Independence' / 'al Nakba') which resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and the collapse of the Arab football league. A new Palestine Football Federation was established in 1952, which was subsequently reformed as the Palestine Football Association (PFA) in 1962. It obtained provisional member status to FIFA in 1995 and was accepted into FIFA in 1998 after the creation of the Palestinian Authority.

The PFA operated two leagues, one in the West Bank (since 1977), the other in the Gaza Strip, but, due to the Israeli occupation and internal disputes, seasons were often incomplete.<sup>8</sup> In 2000 during the second *Intifada* football teams from Gaza were unable to play against teams from the West Bank. The leagues continued to suffer repeated interruptions with travel restriction on players and fans, and 'collateral' damage to sports facilities. Palestinian football has, since the 1930s, faced continued challenges with the 2005 season interrupted four times and only officially ended in 2007 (Mendel, 2017); however, in more recent years the West Bank League has been able to complete its seasons (Montague, 2015). There have been various incarnations of Palestine football league structures with the West Bank Premier League (WBPL) currently the larger and more professional than the Gaza league.<sup>9</sup> In addition to better living conditions (including a more regular supply of electricity, clean water and freedom of movement, see Tawfiq 2016), those playing in the West Bank leagues have been able to earn an income from playing football, partly due to subscription television coverage. The West Bank teams have become a popular destination for players of Palestinian origin, many of whom can earn more money than they would playing for a club in the Israeli second or third tier (Khaled, 2015). However, the ongoing tension in Gaza, the political divisions between those governing Gaza

and the West Bank, and the lack of free movement of players and teams conspire to prevent the establishment of a national Palestinian football league structure (Mendel, 2017).

With FIFA's recognition of Palestine in 1998<sup>10</sup> the men's national team played friendlies against Lebanon, Jordan and Syria in the same year. They subsequently entered the Pan Arab Games in 1999 (Henry, Amara and Al-Tauqi, 2003) and sought to qualify for the finals of the 2000 Asian Cup and FIFA 2002 World Cup. Shortly thereafter, the Israeli authorities refused to issue exit visas/travel permits for half the squad to participate in the 2006 World Cup qualifying matches; in 2007 and 2008 members of the team were similarly prevented from travelling to play in international fixtures. Palestine did not play an official fixture at home until 2008 when they played Jordan:

The political situation took its toll on the event since at least four players – including the team's captain, Saeb Jundiye, from Gaza and others from refugee camps in Lebanon and Syria – could not get Israeli permission to enter the country (Wheeler, 2008).

Playing matches in Jordan is noteworthy, given its relatively stable border, and how Jordan is probably the only Asian confederation member Israel could tolerate as a competitor for Palestine; relations with Jordan are unlike those with Syria and Lebanon whose borders remain indefinitely closed. In 2011 Palestine played its first ever competitive home game in a 2012 World Cup qualifier against Thailand; later that same year, six members of the Palestinian team were refused permission to leave Gaza to play against Mauritania. Since then, FIFA have repeatedly had to intervene to resolve issues of player movement and the Israeli's refusal to issue travel permits. Despite the restrictions it faces, the national team participated in the Asia Football Cup tournaments in 2015 and 2019 with their success seeing them, briefly, overtake Israel in FIFA's world ranking (Dann, 2019).

The PFA has responsibility for the Palestine women's national football team (established in 2003) and a women's league formed in 2011 (Al Arabiya News, 2014). The Palestinian women's team played their first game in the West Bank against Jordan in 2009 (Montague, 2009), with the players having overcome cultural stereotypes in addition to the restrictions generated by the Israeli occupation (The National, 2017; Hadley, 2017).

Not all the difficulties experienced by Palestinian football players can be laid at the door of the Israeli authorities. The complexity the footballers face is increased when noting the different political structures that exist in the Gaza Strip where Hamas governs, and the West Bank where

the Palestinian Authority (PA) governs from its administrative capital at Ramallah, and where the majority of foreign government institutions and representatives are based.<sup>11</sup> The PA has a direct lineage to the Palestine Liberation Organization and was for a long period seen as the legitimate authority of the Palestinian people. However, in recent times, the PA has come under increasing criticism for not effectively representing the Palestinian people and adopting an increasingly neoliberal approach to government (Abunimah, 2014). By contrast, Hamas is an Islamist movement which has governed the Gaza Strip since being elected in 2006. During this time, Hamas has repeatedly challenged the Israeli military and fought against the blockade which has resulted in increased popularity and allowed them to challenge an increasingly weakened PA/Fatah government in the West Bank. It is not possible here to offer a full account of their different politics, interpretations, religious and secular, and the 'divide and rule' tactics used by the Israelis, but one notes the long-standing blockade of the Gaza Strip and the very limited power held by the PA in the West Bank and their lack of control over security, land, water, movement of people and goods, industry and trade (Hass, 2013). The tensions between the PA and Hamas have affected all aspects of sport, including the suspension by the PFA of the football league, split between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, between 2007 and 2010. Whilst some of the difficulties have been self-inflicted, much more significant are the actions of the Israeli state.

### **Israeli actions preventing the development of Palestinian football**

Poor sporting infrastructure in the OPT, specifically the lack of funding, facilities and coaching, has limited the development of Palestinian football at both the grassroots and elite level. In 2014 the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) published a report with a Palestinian NGO which documented the systematic obstruction of the development of Palestinian football (Jennings, Kuttah and Shalabi-Molano 2014). The report detailed the extensive restrictions placed on the movement of players and officials, military violence against players, the prevention of stadium construction and pitch developments, and military actions which had prevented youth tournaments and training schemes from taking place. Further examples are detailed in the Palestine Football Association document '*Sports Under Siege: Israeli Transgressions against Palestinian sports*' (PFA, 2017) which details the damage caused to the sporting infrastructure and how athletes, officials, coaches, visiting players and the shipments of sports equipment have all been affected by the actions of Israeli officials.

One of the most significant influences on preventing the development of Palestinian sporting identity, and the emergence of a sporting hero, is the lack of free movement of players and teams between Gaza and the West Bank. As was noted earlier Palestinian football players face travel restrictions not only between the territories and travel overseas, but also within the West Bank; checkpoints and other oppressive security practices also prevent players from getting to domestic matches. Israel controls the issuing of travel permits, often refusing to grant them on grounds of national security and controls which foreign players and teams can enter the OPT for games or tournaments. There have been repeated incidents of Israel preventing football players from moving between Gaza and the West Bank. In 2016, after representation had been made to football's world governing body, FIFA, Israel was forced to allow players from Gaza to enter the West Bank to play the final match of the Palestine football cup (Hawwash, 2016). Palestinian footballers, like the majority of those living in the OPT, are routinely denied permits to travel. This is a particular problem for team sports when, if they want to leave Gaza to participate in a training camp or competition, it is rare that all players are issued travel permits – which often results in the whole trip being cancelled (Tawfiq, 2016).

Palestinian footballers not only experience restrictions on their movement and face arbitrary detention, they also have access to poor sports facilities. During Israeli military actions in Gaza in 2008/09 ('Operation Cast Lead') significant damage was caused to Gaza's sports infrastructure with the Rafah National Stadium and Palestinian FA buildings destroyed along with damage to 20 sports clubs and 10 fields caused by Israeli airstrikes (BBC, 2012; Tawfiq, 2016). In 2013 FIFA announced they would invest US\$4.5m into Palestinian football and build a headquarters for the PFA, a football academy, two artificial pitches and rebuild the national stadium. However, all reconstruction was limited because of Israeli restrictions on the importation of building materials into the Gaza Strip (U.N., 2016a). Similarly, donations of all sport equipment from international sports organisations face restriction on entry to the OPT, if the Israelis deem they could be used for terrorist activity.

There has been the suggestion that Israel has deliberately targeted individual Palestinian football players to prevent them from becoming successful. One of the most high-profile cases was that of Mahmoud Sarsak, a former member of the Palestinian national football team. In 2009 Gaza-based Sarsak, 22, was arrested whilst entering the West Bank to take part in a training session. He was accused of being a member of Islamic Jihad and of being involved in violent anti-Israeli actions. However, he was never charged, nor given a trial, with his family denied visitations during his entire detention. In 2012, after two years in prison without trial,

Sarsak began a hunger strike to protest his detention. During his 92-day hunger strike representation was made to the Israel Football Association (IFA) from UEFA and FIFPro (an organisation which represents professional football players), and from FIFA President Sepp Blatter expressed his 'grave concern' about the illegal detention of Palestinian football players. Sarsak ended his hunger strike in exchange for early release; after detention without charge for three years, his football career was over. It has been claimed that Sarsak had been detained because 'Israel was afraid that he would become a sporting hero for his people' (Zirin, 2014). Sarsak is just one example of many young, aspiring football players who have been targeted by the IDF with numerous media reports available which detail the extent to which this is happening (Nieuwhof, 2013; Gelblum, 2014; UNHRC, 2019; Wall, 2014).

Seeking to highlight the 'double-standards' on movement and the restrictions of the development of Palestinian football, the Palestine Football Association (PFA) tabled a motion at FIFA's Fifth Congress in 2015, which asked for Israel's suspension from the organisation. The case centered on the presence of six teams from Israeli settlements in the Occupied West Bank who play in the Israeli league (Bloomfield, 2017; Baker, 2016). The PFA and various human rights groups (including Human Rights Watch) argued the presence of these settlement teams violates various United Nations Security Council resolutions and FIFA's own statutes which prohibit a member association from holding games on the territory of another member association without permission (Dorsey, 2016). In response, Israel claims the appellation 'occupied territory' is disputed and should be resolved through wider 'peace negotiations'.

In response to the above 'disruption' of Palestinian sport, the Israeli state claims it is necessary on the grounds of national security. The issue of free movement of players and officials has become a significant source of tension between the Palestinian and Israeli FAs and, by association, between football's governing bodies and national governments. Whilst the Israeli Football Association (IFA) has claimed it has worked to support the movement of Palestinian football players to attend training and matches, the Israeli state has a default position that Palestinians are using football as a cover for terrorist activities. The IFA have admitted that the security concerns of the Israeli state override all other concerns and arguments. Arrest and detention (with or without charge), expulsions, torture, collective punishments (including house demolitions), shooting, and border closure are all justified on the basis of ensuring state security. In the struggle for public opinion various Israeli advocacy groups (nominally independent but pro-Israel and often funded by Zionist supporters) claim that the Palestinians are using and abusing the basic values of international sportsmanship and the spirit upon which

football is founded. A solitary example involving Samah Fares Muhamed Marava, a Palestinian football player, was presented by a prominent Zionist group:

Marava, of Qalqilya, left Israel with his team on a soccer tour in April. While in Qatar, he met with Talal Ibrahim Abd al-Rahman Sarim, a member of Hamas's military wing, where he received money, a cellphone and written messages that he was to bring to Hamas terrorists in his hometown. The Shin Bet (Israel's internal Security Agency) said Marava "cynically exploited" his status as a soccer player to leave the country and make contacts with foreign Hamas agents (United with Israel, 2016).

### **'One man's freedom fighter....'**

The phrase 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter,' might be dismissed as a hackneyed cliché, but it is worth recalling when discussing those who were once seen to be on the 'wrong side.' Nelson Mandela and Steve Biko in the struggle against South African apartheid, and Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams in the Northern Ireland troubles are exemplars. Without wishing to get into the semantics of what constitutes 'terrorism' (Richardson, 2006), this cliché is apposite when looking at how football can be used to remember national heroes. In 2015 teams in a Palestinian youth football tournament were accused of supporting terrorism after they named their squads after heroes/terrorists who had been linked to the deaths of Israeli citizens (Times of Israel, 2015). In 2016 Israeli police charged a Palestinian football coach with inciting terrorism after he and his team, Jerusalem-based Hilal Al Quds (who played in the West Bank Premier League), posed with a banner portraying an image of Mesbah Abu Sabih who, two days previously, had killed two Israelis before being shot by police officers (Times of Israel, 2015). Supporters of Hilal Al Quds took the banner to the club, taking photos of the team posing with the banner and circulating them on social media, before the images were taken down claiming it contravened FIFA regulations.

It is not possible to offer a meaningful distinction between who is a freedom fighter and who is a terrorist given how the term 'terrorist' is used flexibly, often negatively and pejoratively by those seeking to denigrate and discredit the actions of others. Adopting the tactic of refusing to talk to moderates, an unwillingness to negotiate and/or offer meaningful progress and/or assassinating leaders who do emerge, successive Israeli governments have long-practiced a tactic of 'divide-and-rule' and of discrediting and delegitimising those who emerge to speak for the Palestinians (Chomsky, 1999; IMEU, 2013). Any leader who does emerge will, if they

are to have any credibility amongst the Palestinians, be likely to have a history of activism, something the Israelis typically describe as ‘terrorism’. The latest example is the *ad holmium* attacks on Jibril Rajoub, the head of the Palestinian FA and Palestinian IOC in response to his calls for sport-related sanctions to be applied to Israel (Galily, 2018). A member of the central committee of the Fatah faction that controls the PA and a former Fatah head of security, Rajoub has served time in an Israeli prison, a detail Zionist supporters repeatedly promote (Cornibe, 2016).

Sports organisations and individual footballers have, arguably, been less vocal than those operating in the arts and cultural industries and in education (Barrows-Friedman, 2014; Gallagher, 2016; The Guardian, 2015; Rose and Rose, 2017) in supporting the Palestinians, especially when compared to activity that surrounded the sport boycott of apartheid South Africa. There has been an upturn in support for the Palestinians such as that expressed by the Algerian football team who stated they would donate all its FIFA 2014 World Cup money to Gaza in response to the damage caused by Israel’s ‘Operation Protective Edge’<sup>12</sup> (Chandler, 2014). Support has also been expressed by football players Eric Cantona, Cristiano Ronaldo, Eden Hazard and Joey Barton (Rice, 2014; Palmer, 2014). Football fans, most notably the supporters of Scottish club Glasgow Celtic FC, have used the presence of Israeli football teams, who play in UEFA-organised club competitions rather than in Asian confederation competitions, to bring attention to the Palestinian cause<sup>13</sup>; this also saw them sanctioned by football’s governing body (Coyle, 2017).

The continued expansion of football as the most global of sports, the recent successes of the Palestinian men’s national team in international competitions and their rise in FIFA rankings, coupled with increasing international support for the Palestinian people, as evident in the growth of the Boycott, Disinvestment and Sanction movement and the protests against Israeli sports teams, show how nationalism can be progressive if linked to human rights.

## **Conclusion**

As noted at the start of this article the notion of ‘90-minute patriots’ and Hobsbawm’s ‘11 shirts’ view of national identity is especially pertinent when one looks at the disparity between what Palestine has in terms of football and what it has in terms of a nation state. When the Palestinian men’s national football team qualified for the 2015 Asian Cup and travelled to Australia to participate in their first international tournament, the team gave those in the

Palestinian diaspora and Australian football fans an opportunity, albeit briefly, to see 'Palestine' as a nation (Rego, 2015; Moore, 2015); however, just one week earlier the Australian government voted at the UN not to convey nationhood upon Palestine (Carr, 2015). This illustrates the disconnect between 'Palestine' as a sporting entity and Palestine as a nation state.

Sport will inevitably feature low on the list of priorities for those living under occupation, and as research from United Nations (2016b), B'tselem (2017), Human Rights Watch (2017), and Amnesty International (2018) have each shown, Palestinians living under occupation lack the basic human rights of security, health, freedom of movement, education and work. Palestinians continue to experience systematic ethnic cleansing, house/village/community demolitions, collective punishments, travel restrictions, state torture, detention without trial, assassination, mass unemployment, subsistence wages, poor living conditions, inadequate health services, sub-standard transport, housing shortages and inferior education.

This article has suggested that Israel has consistently sought, deliberately or otherwise, to destroy (physically and symbolically) the aspirations of Palestinian footballers. Targeting all forms of sport has a ripple effect on wider Palestinian society and reduces the avenues open to them to express their national identity. Despite all this, football is leading the way, with the success of the Palestinian men's national team, being perhaps the best opportunity to represent Palestine on the international sporting stage. Football is an important symbol and whether the national team is successful or not, it remains important in uniting the Palestinian people and their supporters to create a physical sense of unity. This is especially important in their struggle for social justice, their human rights and a homeland.

This article has shown how football has become an important site in establishing, maintaining and celebrating expressions of Palestinian national identity and nationhood. The intention has been to stimulate discussions on the important role that football plays for a people under occupation. The article has also sought to show that sport, specifically football, is neither a neutral activity nor 'politics-free'. All those involved in sport have a responsibility to consider where they stand; as American historian Howard Zinn (2002) has noted 'you can't be neutral on a moving train.'



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<sup>1</sup> 'Eretz Israel' ('the Land of Israel') is the idea of a modern Jewish state that replicates the biblical land of Israel at its greatest expanse.

<sup>2</sup> While there are different strands of Zionist thinking, there has been support from Christian Zionists who see Israel as the natural home of the Jewish people and one that was promised to the Jewish people by god (i.e. they have a biblical mandate, see Spector, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The Gaza Strip is 25 miles (41 kilometres) long, and at its maximum 7.5 miles (12k) wide. It is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea, Egypt, and Israel. Initially governed by the Palestinian Authority, it has since 2007 been governed by Hamas. Approximately 1.85 million Palestinians live in Gaza making it the third most densely populated area in the world. The closure of exit and entry points (by Egypt and Israel) and decade-long blockade have led to it being

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described as ‘a 140 square mile open-air prison’ (see Baconi, 2019; Pappé and Chomsky, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> As Bregman (2014) notes, the terms one uses to describe ‘the land’ is often indicative of one’s political leaning: ‘Palestine’ is used by those who are pro-Palestinian, the ‘Occupied Territories’ by those on the broad left, the ‘Liberated Territories’ and/or ‘Judea and Samaria’ by right-wing Jewish supporters, and the ‘Administrative Territories’ and /or Territories beyond the Green Line’ by those who sit on the fence.

<sup>5</sup> There are an estimated two million Palestinians in Jordan. Syria, Chile, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia each have an estimated Palestinian population of around 500,000.

<sup>6</sup> The Yishuv was the Jewish community that existed in Palestine during the 19th century, before the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

<sup>7</sup> Although Palestine played in qualification matches for the 1934 FIFA World Cup the team contained no Palestine Arabs.

<sup>8</sup> A Palestinian league was re-established shortly after the Oslo Accords in the mid-1990s. The resurrected Palestinian league was set up as semi-professional and consisted of two regions: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The intention was for the champion of the West Bank to play against the champion of the Gaza Strip, with the winner declared as the national champion.

<sup>9</sup> Many of the clubs in Gaza represent little more than small, claustrophobic neighbourhoods with the Gaza league, unlike the West Bank league, not allowing foreign players (Khaled, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> This was ten years before the United Nations recognised Palestine.

<sup>11</sup> Jerusalem remains the unambiguous ‘Capital of Palestine’.

<sup>12</sup> Israel’s ‘*Operation Protective Edge*’ was a 50-day assault on the Gaza Strip which resulted in the deaths of more than 2000 Palestinians and significant damage to the infrastructure and living conditions.

<sup>13</sup> Glasgow Celtic FC is a soccer club born out of Irish-Catholic immigration to Scotland; for a discussion of its ethnic and religious identities, see Bradley (2006, 2011, 2015). In opposition to Celtic Fans support for the Palestinians, fans of Glasgow Rangers display Israeli (Star of David) flags at matches (Rkaina, 2016).