

Dorsey's Column

The Rise, Fall, and Rise Again of the Politics of Middle Eastern Soccer

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Introduction

The virtually continuous role of soccer as a key player in the history and development of the Middle East and North Africa dating back to the late 19th century seemed to have come to an abrupt halt in 2014 as the Saudi-United Arab Emirates(UAE)-led counterrevolution gained momentum, the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry accelerated, and the political rift in the Gulf initially manifested itself.

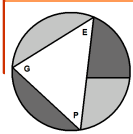
The long and dramatic history of the Middle Eastern intersection of sports and politics took a backseat as the fallout of the popular Arab revolts of 2011 unfolded. In contrast to other parts of the world in which rulers and politicians at times employed sports as a tool to achieve political goals, sports in general and soccer in particular had been a virtually continuous player in the Middle East in terms of nation, state and regime formation; assertion of national identity; the struggle for independence; republicanism vs monarchy; ideological battles; and fights for human, political, gender and labour rights.¹

Soccer in the Middle East and North Africa had repeatedly demonstrated its potential as an engine of social and political change—not necessarily the lovey-dovey kind of building bridges and contributing to peace, but more often than not divisive and confrontational.

That was evident with the role of soccer in the 1919 Egyptian revolution²; the struggles for nationhood, statehood and independence of Jews³, Palestinians⁴ and Algerians⁵; the quest for modernity in Turkey and Iran⁶; the 2011 popular revolts⁷; post-2011 resistance to a UAE-Saudi-inspired counterrevolution⁸; the awarding by world soccer governing body FIFA (*Fédération Internationale de Football Association*) of the 2022 World Cup hosting rights to Qatar⁹; and ultimately the battle for regional dominance between Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as the Gulf crisis that since June 2017 has pitted a UAE-Saudi-led alliance against Qatar.¹⁰

The Gulf crisis put an end to a period starting with the crushing of student protests with militant soccer fans at their core against the military coup in Egypt in 2013 that brought Mr. Al-Sisi to power in which the sport no longer seemed a useful prism for analyzing developments in the Middle East and North Africa. The subsequent crackdown turned Egyptian universities into security fortresses and seemed to have largely silenced the ultras i.e. militant soccer fans.¹¹

The first round of the Gulf crisis in 2014 began when Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar's capital Doha for a period of ten months¹²; the



escalating war in Syria; the rise of Saudi Arabia's King Salman and his son, Mohammed bin Salman, and the changes they introduced in Saudi Arabia; the escalation of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and its associated proxy wars in Syria, Jemen and until recently Iraq; and the initial phase of the second round in the Gulf crisis with last year's imposition of a diplomatic and economic boycott of Qatar: all these events have reinforced a sense that soccer is no longer a working prism for analysis of events.

More recent developments: soccer re-emerging as a political and social factor

A number of more recent developments have however reversed the sense that soccer has ceased to play any transformative role in the region. One is the re-emergence of soccer in Egypt as an important player despite the crackdown on the anti-Sisi protests. Mr. Al-Sisi has repeatedly tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to forge links with the ultras while the ultras in past years despite the repression again have emerged as one of the few groups willing to stage protests. Scores of protesters have since been sentenced to prison, many remain detained awaiting trial.¹³

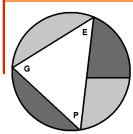
Enlisting the support of soccer represented by the Egyptian Football Association and major clubs for his re-election in the Spring of 2018, Mr. Al-Sisi has utilized soccer as a key tool of gaining popularity and even legitimacy, by associating himself with something the country is crazy about and that evokes deep-seated, tribal-like emotions.¹⁴ Egypt's qualification for this year's World Cup like that of several other Arab teams, cemented the renewed role of soccer in Egypt and the other qualifying countries.

Similarly, Saudi soccer diplomacy in Iraq has earned the kingdom brownie points. Soccer, despite the Gulf crisis, has moreover proven to be the wedge that has driven change and significant reform of the labor regime in Qatar. The changes fall short of what human rights groups, international trade unions and the International Labour Organization (ILO) wanted to see. Nonetheless, the changes amount to far more than a cosmetic facelift.¹⁵

Last but not least, soccer, and particularly the Qatar World Cup, is an important arena in the increasingly overt public relations battle between the Gulf state and its detractors, particularly the United Arab Emirates.¹⁶ In addition to playing an important role in the politics of the region, Middle Eastern soccer has in the past three years highlighted the hypocrisy of the insistence by world soccer body FIFA that good governance should ensure its separation from politics. The current endorsement system and practice of a host-country candidate by a football association and/or clubs makes a mockery of a division of sports and politics. So do FIFA decisions regarding venues and choice of referees for competition matches involving teams of the Middle East's feuding states.¹⁷

Politicized soccer and kindred games vis-à-vis autocrats in history

The political role of soccer is rooted in the politics of sports that goes back to 5th century Rome, when support groups identified as the Blues, Greens, Reds and Whites in the absence of alternative channels for public expression acclaimed a candidate slated to be installed as



Rome's emperor in games dominated by chariot racing. Much like modern-day militant soccer fans or ultras, they frequently shouted political demands in between races in a bid to influence policy.¹⁸

In doing so, the Romans set a trend that has since proven its value as well as its risk. In today's modern world, soccer pitches, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa, were frequently viewed as barometers of the public mood and indicators of political and social trends. They also were platforms for the public venting of pent-up frustration and anger as well as grievances.

Like Rome, the Byzantine empire also served as an early example of the impact of fan power. That was most evident in the 532 AD Nika revolt, the most violent in Constantinople's history, when the then dominant Blues and Greens rioted for a week, destroyed much of the city, sacked the Hagia Sophia, and almost succeeded in forcing the Byzantine emperor Justinian I to vacate his throne.¹⁹

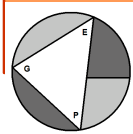
The identification, through patronage and micromanagement, of modern-day Arab autocrats with soccer emulates the Romans' use of games and sports to solidify their power. The Greens and the Blues and their fans in fifth-century-AD games were the Roman predecessors of today's Middle Eastern and North African soccer fans who expressed similarly deep-seated passions.

Arab autocrats, however, unlike their Roman predecessors, were determined to prevent soccer clubs from becoming arbiters of political power. In contrast to the Romans, giving fans and the public a say in the choice of a leader would be unthinkable in contemporary autocratic Arabia. It would have to give the public a degree of sovereignty and undermine the position of the ruler as the neo-patriarchic, autocratic father in the words of Palestinian-American scholar Hisham Sharabi, who characterized autocracies in the Middle East and North Africa as expressions of neo-patriarchy.²⁰

Soccer was the perfect tool for neo-patriarchic autocrats. Their values were the same values that are often projected onto soccer: assertion of male superiority in most aspects of life, control or harnessing of female lust, and a belief in a masculine God. The game's popularity, moreover, made it the perfect soft-power tool to wield transnational sporting influence in an era of decolonization followed by a Cold War in which sporting powers like the United States and the Soviet Union were focused on the Olympics rather than the World Cup, and it continues to serve this purpose in subsequent globalization.

As a result, neo-patriarchy framed the environment in which militant soccer fans turned the soccer field into a battlefield. Arab autocrats, such as the toppled Egyptian and Tunisian presidents Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, had no intention of risking a repeat of Justinian I's experience.

Theirs was a world in which there could be no uncontrolled public space, no opportunity for the public to express itself, voice grievances, and vent pent-up anger and frustration. They could suppress most expressions of dissent, such as underground music. Musicians were intimidated, imprisoned, or refused entry into the country, with by and large little or no public response. Labour activism was brutally repressed.



The soccer pitch, however, like the mosque, were venues for the deep-seated emotions they evoked among a majority of the population and could not simply be repressed or shut down. The mosque proved easier to control. The pulpit was subjected to government supervision; clerics were state employees. Security forces successfully confronted more militant, politicized Islamists.²¹

Soccer pitches were not that simple. Fans, particularly militants, who described themselves as ultras and viewed club executives as representatives or corrupt pawns of a repressive regime and players as mercenaries who played for the highest bidder, were cut from a different cloth. They understood themselves as their club's only true supporters, and as a result believed that they were the real owners of the stadium. In staking their claim, the fans emerged in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco as the most, if not only, organized force willing and able to figuratively and literally challenge the regime's effort to control all public space.

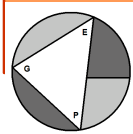
Co-optation and repression of the soccer stadium

The fans' claim positioned soccer as both a threat and an opportunity for Middle Eastern and North African autocrats. The threat was an increasingly fearless, well-organized, highly politicized, and street battle-hardened force that attracted thousands of young men who were willing and able to stand their ground against the security forces. In doing so, they were publicly challenging the state's authority.

Long deprived of the option to simply close down the contested public space, autocrats like Mr. Hosni Mubarak in Egypt were forced to respond with a combination of co-optation and repression. Alongside heavy-handed use of security forces, they sought to identify themselves with the game, the region's most popular form of popular culture, by basking in the success of national teams and major clubs and exploiting neo-patriarchal attitudes by showering players with expensive gifts and the ruler's attention, while at the same time denouncing the ultras as criminals and thugs.²² That pattern continues to this day, buffeted by significantly stepped-up repression and in the case of Egypt the virtual closure to the public of stadiums for much of the past seven years ironically made possible by the 2011 revolt.

Co-optation potentially creates significant opportunity for the autocrat, no more so than at times of major international competitions like the World Cup. Identification with one of the country's most popular and emotive pastimes offers the autocrat the prospect of harnessing it to polish his often tarnished image.

Co-optation also provides an autocrat with an additional peg for favourable media attention that could help distract attention away from or overshadow criticism. Finally, it enables autocrats to manipulate public emotions at given moments and rally the nation around them, as the Mubaraks did against Algeria in late 2009.



The Middle East and soccer today: utilized chaos, contestation and (lack of) dreams and prospects

In many ways the Middle East of today is not the Middle East of a decade ago. Arab autocrats recognize that their efforts to upgrade autocracy and embrace economic and social reform coupled with increased repression, are contested if not contradictory. Fortunately for them, the mayhem in the region seems to work in their favour. The wars and the other forms of violence invoke nationalist and other useful, manipulable emotions and invoke fears that popular protest could lead to chaos and anarchy. Yet, discontent is simmering just below the surface much as it did in the run-up to the 2011 revolts—and the soccer pitch is often where it rears its head.

The mayhem in the Middle East and North Africa is not exclusively, but in many ways, due to autocrats' inability and failure to deliver public goods and services. That is true not only for the region's autocratic Sunni-Arab majority but also for Iran, and Tunisia, the Arab revolt's one and only relative success story to date.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman appears to be holding out a dream for his kingdom. But that dream increasingly is being shattered in Yemen, and at home has yet to produce more than greater freedoms for women and opportunity for entertainment. Autocrats in the Middle East and North Africa are about upgrading and modernizing their regimes to ensure their survival, not about real sustainable change.

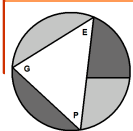
Human rights activist and former Tunisian president Moncef Marzouki was asked in a *Wall Street Journal* interview why it was not only those who lacked opportunity and felt that they had no prospects and no hopes, but also educated Tunisians with jobs who had joined the Islamic State. His answer was: "It's not simply a matter of tackling socioeconomic roots. You have to go deeper and understand that these guys have a dream—and we don't. We had a dream—our dream was called the Arab Spring. And our dream is now turning into a nightmare. But the young people need a dream, and the only dream available to them (was) the caliphate".²³

Mohammed bin Salman has come closest to creating a dream. For now, it remains a dream on which he has yet to deliver. Much of the Middle East does not have a dream.

A court ruling in 2015 in Egypt since the rise of Mr. Al-Sisi as the new autocratic President in 2014, banned ultras groups as terrorist organizations. A similar attempt failed in Turkey. Yet, the scores of arrests in Egypt demonstrate that the ultras are alive and kicking. Said a founder of one Egypt's original ultras groups that played a key role prior to the rise of Mr. Al-Sisi: "This is a new generation. It's a generation that can't be controlled. They don't read. They believe in action and experience. They have balls. When the opportunity arises, they will do something bigger than we ever did".²⁴

Conclusion

In sum, soccer resistance in the Middle East and North Africa may be down but not out. For the time being at least, autocratic rulers retain the upper hand and use the sport to enhance their



grip on power, ironically aided and abetted by FIFA. Yet, it is that very approach to the sport that also has positioned and sustained it as a potential or even actual platform for protest and resistance.

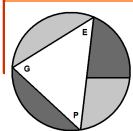
The jury is out on whether autocratic efforts at reform will produce sustainable results. The record so far is mixed at best. If there is one group at the ready if reforms fail, it is likely to be soccer fans.

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