

Israel, Palestine, and FIFA

Why questioning the legality of Israel's West Bank-based football clubs highlights the Palestinian need for recognition and Israel's ontological anxiety

Holly Christiana Sommers

BA International Relations

This paper argues that a 2015 case made to FIFA by the Palestinian Football Association to suspend Israeli football teams based in the occupied territories and settlements aptly illustrates key tenets of Palestinian and Israeli state identity: notably, *the Palestinian need for international recognition and Israeli anxiety over both international stigma and its own domestic national identity*. On the one hand, the FIFA case highlights the Palestinian desire for institution-led international recognition of the existence and legitimacy of Palestine both territorially and through the development and maintenance of a Palestinian national biography. Conversely, for Israel, the FIFA case incites a substantial degree of 'ontological anxiety' through two conditions: firstly, its fear of international stigma and delegitimation, and secondly, a domestic identity crisis, in which choosing between playing international football or territorially defending the settlements causes the sort of internal rupture that the Israeli state has meticulously attempted to avoid.

Keywords: Israel/Palestine, FIFA, national identity, recognition, ontological anxiety, football

Over the course of 2015 and 2016, the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) made various calls to FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) to suspend the Israeli Football Association (IFA), and thus Israel, from international football on the grounds of three major issues: firstly, as a result of restrictions

imposed by Israel on Palestinian players and officials; secondly, due to ongoing racism in Israeli stadiums; and thirdly, over the question of Israeli football teams based in the occupied territories and settlements. The third claim will serve as the basis for discussion. This paper will argue that the PFA's continued campaigning to FIFA (and its subsequent responses) aptly exemplifies key tenets of Palestinian and Israeli state identity, notably, the Palestinian need for international recognition and Israeli anxiety over both international stigma and its own domestic national identity. In order to establish this central argument, this paper will begin with an outline of the case itself, as well as an explanation of the principal actors and interlocutors involved, including organisations acting on behalf of the state, and what they served to lose or gain from this campaign. Secondly, by drawing on Taylor's theory of recognition, this paper will discuss how the case emphasises the Palestinian desire for international recognition, the importance of this for the development and maintenance of the Palestinian national biography and the central role of institutions in this process. Thirdly, Israeli 'ontological anxiety'⁶ will be explored in relation to Israel's fear of international stigma, alongside the subsequent reaction of the IFA to the campaign. Finally, through the use of social identity theory, this paper will reveal how the FIFA case crucially spotlights a domestic crisis for Israeli national identity, as having to choose between playing international football (which plays a huge role in Israeli society) or territorially defending the settlements would cause large domestic complications.

Context

Outlining both the content and actors of this particular case is central to understanding what is at stake for all three interlocutors involved (the PFA, the IFA, and even FIFA). The three principal actors are important because they represent a greater body than solely their institution. The PFA acts as an important representative of the 'increasing international recognition' for Palestine and constitutes a central 'cultural component of Palestinian identity' which has provided a tangible 'symbol of statehood and representation on the international stage' (Duerr, 2012:661). Both the PFA and IFA represent the states of Palestine and Israel respectively on both an international and domestic level, with their participation in institutions such as FIFA serving to reify their identities as functional members of the international community. ('States' in this instance takes Max Weber's definition of the state as 'a human community that successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory' [Weber, 1946:77]). FIFA is an interesting interlocutor, which, as an important international institution, does not wish to be seen as incompetent, and as a result would prefer the issue to disappear, arguably favouring the Israeli position. The

⁶ *Ontological anxiety* is my own amalgamation of Giddens' (1991) 'ontological security' and 'existential anxiety', discussed below.

stakes of the campaign are exceptionally important for the PFA, and more broadly, for Palestinian identity. A victory in their campaign would result in both the recognition of Palestine as a legitimate actor on the international stage, and, crucially, international recognition of Israeli wrongdoing, which serves to both damage Israel's international image and bolster the Palestinian cause. These outcomes will be simplified, for the case of brevity, to the Palestinian 'demand for recognition' (Taylor, 1994:25). For the IFA, and consequently also for Israeli identity, a loss in the campaign would result in 'international shaming', the results of which would be extremely harmful to Israeli international image and its identity as a compliant and lawful member of the international community (Adler-Nissen, 2014:143). Furthermore, as football is 'the most popular sport in Israel' (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the choice between playing international football or defending the settlements would result in the kind of internal entanglement that Israel's settlement policy has assiduously avoided over the years.

Focusing on the third section of the suspension campaign (the question of the Israeli football teams based in the occupied territories and settlements), the case by the PFA utilised FIFA's own regulations (Articles 11, 72, and 73), which state that 'one national football association cannot play on the territory of another football association without the latter's and FIFA's consent' (FIFA, 2019). Without the consent of either the PFA or FIFA, the clubs are in clear violation of FIFA regulations. The case was substantiated with the evidence of other existing football clubs in countries such as Crimea and Northern Cyprus, who, due to territorial disputes, are excluded from FIFA. The first attempt by the PFA to suspend the IFA from FIFA on the abovementioned grounds was in 2015, and although the attempt failed, it led to the creation of a FIFA-led special monitoring committee to deal with the dispute. In 2017, after a report by the monitoring committee was submitted, FIFA released a statement declaring that the situation between the two states had 'nothing to do with football', that 'interference might aggravate the situation', and that, as a result, they would 'not take any position' regarding the dispute (FIFA, 2017). FIFA's decision concerning the campaign is important, and the reasoning for why these conclusions were made will be explored, but the failed nature of the campaign is not central to this discussion.

Palestinian Desire for International Recognition

In order to best understand how the PFA's campaign highlights the Palestinian desire for international recognition, it is first necessary to explain what is meant by the term recognition and the reasons for its significance (Taylor, 1994:25). Recognition is multifaceted; however, a process of recognition involves an acceptance of the existence, legitimacy, and validity of a given thing. For Charles Taylor, whose classic essay 'The Politics of Recognition' (1994) provoked much discussion on the theme, the 'demand for recognition' is a direct result of the

interdependence between recognition and identity (identity, for Taylor, designating ‘something like a person’s understanding of who they are, of their fundamental defining characteristics’ [1994:25]). Although there are multifaceted reasons for a state’s desire for recognition, at its core is the notion that their identity is dependent upon ‘dialogical relations with others’, and thus, through the very acts of dialogue and participation, there is a recognition of both parties as legitimate and valid (1994:34). This is particularly central to the Palestinian case, as opposed to Israel, for whom the nature and characterisation of recognition by international interlocutors is of paramount importance: the Palestinian state simply craves a recognition of its existence, legitimacy, and validity.

Through the international recognition and legitimisation of a state identity, the development and maintenance of what Berenskoetter (2014:279) calls a ‘national biography’ takes place. This is especially dominant in this case, where the legitimacy of one state’s ‘national biography’, and thus its legitimacy as a state, rests upon the delegitimization of the other (2014: 279). These competing ‘national biographies’ are central to the conflict between Israel and Palestine, especially concerning territory. This is made clear through the central national biographies of the Jewish Holocaust (or *Shoah*) and the Palestinian *Nakba*, which concern the return to and expulsion from the land, respectively. Both events are what Berenskoetter labels an *Erlebnis*, the German term for an emotional lived experience which then becomes a core piece of one’s life story (2014:271). The recognition of each *Erlebnis* is central to the legitimacy of both states, and the continuation of these narratives is a dispute that is pursued both domestically, through individual identifications with the narrative, and, crucially for this case, internationally, through recognition and acceptance of territorial claims based upon these founding events. As the dispute over Israeli football teams based in the occupied territories and settlements was one of the central arguments of the PFA’s campaign, it highlights the centrality of the territorial narratives in the national and cultural biography. The PFA’s attempt to gain recognition of the Palestinian narrative by highlighting and voicing the illegal territorial nature of the Israeli football clubs serves as further evidence of the need for international recognition of Palestine’s existence, legitimacy, and validity.

The Role of Institutions

It becomes clear then why international institutions play an important role in state recognition or ‘misrecognition’ (Taylor, 1997:25). For interlocutors whose recognition is both valuable and meaningful on the world stage, the importance of the act of recognising and overlooking these individual national biographies cannot be overestimated. In this particular case, the existence of a Palestinian team that plays within the institution of FIFA furthers the image of Palestine as ‘being as equal and legitimate as any other state’, as it plays matches alongside other recognised states, and serves to legitimise Palestinian identity through participation

and dialogue within the institution (Duerr, 2012:659). However, this particular case also highlights the influence of the international interlocutor, based upon what may or may not be in their best interests. With the power to supply the ‘narrative material infrastructure’ for either party, international institutions such as FIFA have the capacity to render ‘some voices and representations as dominant’ whilst side-lining others (Berenskoetter, 2014:279). This was evident in FIFA’s eventual response to the PFA’s claims, which stated that the organisation would ‘remain neutral’ on the matter by not imposing any form of sanctions (FIFA, 2017). Significantly, however, FIFA’s lack of action favoured not a neutral approach, but instead served to reify Israeli claims to both the land and legitimacy, as it showed international acceptance of the status quo, where Israeli clubs remained on the occupied territories. This is also significant as there is a blatant imbalance of power (including legislatively, financially, and militarily) between the two states, rendering the necessity of the international body as essential for the less empowered actor, in this case Palestine. FIFA may have deemed its response neutral, but the Palestinian state has little or no leverage in legislative standing, whilst Israel has little use for such institutions as it has the capacity to challenge the smaller state unaccompanied. As a result, FIFA’s response of neutrality benefited the Israeli state.

Israeli Ontological Anxiety on the International Stage

To best highlight what was at stake, not only for the IFA, but also for broader Israeli state identity, it is necessary to understand and consequently utilise the notion that scholars have termed ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991). Attributed largely to the work of Anthony Giddens and Ronald Laing, a position of ontological security implies that states have both a ‘stable sense of self’ (Berenskoetter, 2016:1) and ‘know virtually all of the time, in terms of some description or another, both what one is doing and why one is doing it’ (Giddens, 1991:35). States pursue ontological security through what Giddens terms ‘routine’, alongside their relationships and actions with other important actors and institutions (Mitzen, 2006:341).⁷ This results in a defined sense of identity within the state, and consequently the state can act as a coherent and confident body within the international sphere. As a result, if anything arises that threatens that ontological security, the state is thrown into a situation of ontological ‘anxiety’, whereby that ‘stable sense of Self’ is suddenly questioned, and thus the legitimacy of the state as a whole (Berenskoetter, 2020:273). In this particular case, what arose was a claim that the IFA was breaching the regulations of an institution that Israel takes great pride in being part of (as will be later explored). The heart of Israeli anxiety over this case was caused

⁷ Mitzen’s text contains a very thorough introduction to the concept of ontological security.

by the state's fear of stigma from the international community, which would result in a questioning of its legitimacy.

As a powerful function of maintaining order within the international community, stigma has the ability to produce 'status loss and discrimination' against a state if it behaves in a way that is seen to break norms (Adler-Nissen, 2014:147). Significantly for this case, whilst the mere existence of the claim is anxiety-producing for Israel, if further action were to be taken it would be internationally embarrassing as the state would be seen as incapable of following FIFA guidelines, and thus be rendered as a deviant state. Secondly, as mentioned above, it harms both the legitimacy and national biography of the state in terms of disputing its territory. Due to the anxiety over the potential for international stigma, the discourse of the Israeli response to the campaign made sure to highlight that sport and politics were separate spheres, therefore severing the link between the IFA and Israel's national biography. This was evident in comments made by the IFA president, Ofer Eini, who stated, 'Let's leave politics to the politicians while we play soccer the best we can' (Beaumont, 2015). Again emphasising the importance of the international interlocutor, the Palestinian side had a contrastingly vested interest in the state being central to the campaign, and thus to football, which meant that FIFA could be utilised as a higher governing authority. However, Israel's eagerness for the issue to be fairly silent and remain largely culturally based serves as evidence of its anxiety over the ramifications of international stigma for its ontological security.

Domestic Israeli Ontological Anxiety

Israeli ontological anxiety over the campaign was not limited to the realm of the international, but also permeated into the domestic. To better understand why the dilemma of the campaign for Israeli identity is so important, it is necessary to utilise a particular aspect of social identity theory (SIT), as pioneered by Tajfel and Turner (1986:7). Importantly for this case, SIT stresses the way in which a sense of self (which includes national biography and ontological security) is based upon membership and participation within a social group; these can take the forms of religion, nationality, or notably, sport. In this case, the important links between patriotic sentiment and football emphasises the way in which football, as 'the most popular sport in Israel' (Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.) plays an important role in the maintenance of Israeli identity. The right-wing football club Beitar Jerusalem, which 'traces its historical roots back to the nationalist Herut party', is a fitting example of this, and serves as a direct contrast to Israel's narrative that sport and politics shouldn't mix. Beitar 'refuses to field Arab players', is infamous for its 'anti-Arab chants', and is the 'team of choice for right-wing politicians' (Buck, 2010). As a result, football within Israel is steeped in political and national sentiment, which then serves, as Tajfel and Turner's SIT suggests, to further

reinforce the Israeli national sense of self. As a result of this strong connection, and by stressing the illegitimacy of the Israeli-based football clubs, the PFA spotlighted an important internal crisis for Israeli national identity and sense of self. In having to choose between playing international football or defending the settlements, Israel would either have an important part of its internal identity damaged or lose claims to its territorially based national biography on the international stage.

Conclusion

This essay has shown how the attempts by the PFA to ban the IFA from FIFA on the grounds of Israeli clubs being based in the occupied territories emphasises both the Palestinian need for recognition and Israeli ontological anxiety. In order to frame the subsequent discussion, this essay began with an explanation of the case itself, as well as stating both who the principal actors and interlocutors involved were and what was at stake for them. The Palestinian desire for international recognition was then discussed within the context of the case and, drawing on Taylor's theory of recognition, the argument focused on the importance of recognition for the development and maintenance of national biographies, as well as the important role of institutions in aiding (and hindering) this process. Next, Israeli 'ontological anxiety' was explored in relation to its fear of international stigma, alongside the important 'sport and politics don't mix' reaction of the IFA to the campaign. Finally, this essay revealed how the FIFA case crucially spotlighted the domestic dilemma for Israeli national identity, for which football and politics are clearly intertwined, and thus the dilemma created by having to choose between playing international football or defending the settlements. At the time of writing, all five Israeli clubs (Ma'aleh Adumim, Ariel, Bik'at Hayarden, Givat Ze'ev, Kiryat Arba, and Oranit) remain based within the West Bank

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