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Can Soccer Help Arabs Achieve Equality in Israel?

“We Arabs want to be part of Israel. In, not outsiders, not on the sidelines. Our soccer is a cry, a cry that we want to be “in”, not red-carded by Israel, not offside in Israel.”¹

Presented as a global movement for good, soccer can be seen as a way for people to simply play together. Exhibiting the sport as an uplifting story by showing soccer as a route to equality often masks society’s true problems. This disconnect between soccer as a unifying force and soccer as an actual manifestation of a nation’s pressing issues is clearest in Israel. Israel’s 1948 creation led to displacement of the native Arab population, yet some remained. In the context of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, these Israeli Arabs do not garner as much international attention as those living in the West Bank or Gaza Strip or in refugee camps. Their lives, while no easier than other Arabs whose land was also lost because of the 1948 war, take on a confused identity: they are Israeli citizens, yet they are second-class citizens in a state that defines itself predominately as a homeland of the Jews.

Soccer will be used as a lens to examine the relationship between Arabs and Jews in Israel. Due to soccer’s perceived distance from the political sphere, it is viewed as a uniting force. Some Israelis try to demonstrate soccer as a means for greater change by emphasizing Bnei Sakhnin’s win, towns like Kiryat Shmona, or players like Abbas Suan. However, soccer cannot be separated from Israel’s ethnic nature. Israel was created as Jewish homeland. Consequently, equality is difficult when Jewish citizens are systematically prioritized over Arab citizens. Israel has been sliding politically right and

therefore is more reluctant to compromise. This hesitancy is also due to Arab Israeli's connection to the Israeli-Palestinian* struggle and the Arab world.† Israeli sports are strongly connected to political parties, as demonstrated by the relationship between Likud and Beitar Jerusalem FC. When Sakhnin became the first predominately Arab team to win the state cup, Arab Israelis believed this win could possibly translate into equality; an Israeli assault on Gaza two days later shattered this illusion. This paper will look at Israeli soccer in order to demonstrate that participation in soccer does not translate to political participation.

Political leaders believe in the power of sport. There exists a consensus that sport (especially soccer) has power to bridge cultural divides. Kofi Annan, former Secretary General of the UN, argued “at its best [sport] can bring people together, no matter what their origin, background, religious beliefs or economic status.”² Annan's comments demonstrate that policy makers believe sport is “disconnected from the world of politics.”³ Soccer is commonly referred to as a “global language”⁴ because it can “transcend cultural differences.”⁵ Consequently, an ideal vision of equal participation flourishes on the soccer field. Stories emerge from Israel that attempt to demonstrate soccer as means for peace, coexistence and unity between Israeli Arabs and Jews. Writers argue soccer is “an arena in which the Arab citizen can feel equal to the Jewish citizen”⁶ by showing soccer proves equality is possible. Following Bnei Sakhnin's 2004 Israeli State Cup win, these anecdotes became common. Sakhnin's win gave Israeli Jews a

* This paper will define Arabs living in Israel as “Israeli Arabs” rather than “Palestinians”

† The careful reader will notice that this paper will focus on the Israeli soccer experience of Arabs rather than the Jewish one; this is because the interest lays in understanding conflict of equality as manifested on the soccer field and Jewish Israeli players do not face the same obstacles.

“dramatic proposal” to shift national identity into “an Israeliness that is not necessarily Jewish.”⁷ to one that included its Arab citizens.

Soccer unified towns like Kiryat Shmona, a town subject to intense rocket attacks.[‡] Izzy Sheratzky “began investing heavily in Kiryat Shmona”⁸ after seeing the city destroyed by rockets. Soccer boosted citizens’ morale. Sheratzky became the owner of Hapoel Ironi Kiryat Shmona, proclaiming, “with soccer you can [have] peace, the Arab and the Israeli living together.”⁹ Sheratzky believes that soccer is an innately positive force. Similarly, Nazareth, known as the “Arab capital of Israel,”¹⁰ had a team, Maccabi Ahi Nazareth, that made the premier league alongside Sakhnin. Azmi Nassar, the team’s coach, “could not contain his joy”¹¹ and spoke to reporters, telling them: “You see, this is how it should be – in soccer, as in life, on our team there are Muslims, Jews, Christians, Druze – there is no difference.”¹² Soccer presents Israel with an opportunity for inclusion. Equality on the field gives Israel the chance for the redefinition of its identity.

However, soccer may never serve as a place for cooperation in Israel, regardless of such stories. Israeli soccer functions as a mirror for Israeli society and politics: relations remain mired in permanent racism and tensions for the foreseeable future. Israel is an ethnic democracy, an “institutionalization of majority control.”¹³ The goal of ethnic democracies is to create a homogeneous nation-state. In Israel, there is no separation between religion, ethnicity and nationality. Israel defines itself as a state of and for Jews. Israel’s official language is Hebrew and its institutions, holidays, and symbols are all

[‡] It is on Israel’s border with Lebanon, therefore a target for rocket cross-border attacks.

Jewish. Defenders of Israel's democracy argue that *Hatikvah*[§] is no different from *God Save the Queen* or the Star of David on the flag is like the cross on Sweden's flag. Yet these claims disregard that in the countries that Israel is compared to, "ethnic features are secondary ...[and] mere remnants of the past."¹⁴ As former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said, Israel is "a democratic and Jewish state that protects human rights."¹⁵ This "double-barreled commitment"¹⁶ of attempting to be Jewish and democratic cannot be maintained. A state cannot be effective as a democracy if one group is systematically disenfranchised.

Arabs are a minority in Israel. They live under a government that restricts their "political rights and behavior."¹⁷ Since Israeli Arabs are ethnically part of the Arab world, which threatens Israel's existence, the Israeli government feels justified discriminating. Israel makes use of this perceived (and actual) threat to "blur tensions emanating from its ethnic nature and to weather pressures of Israeli-Arabs for equality and participation."¹⁸ Following the 1967 War, there was a change in emphasis¹⁹ in Israel: "Jewish-Zionist identity was strengthened at the expense of democracy."²⁰ In six days, Israel tripled its size.^{**21} The land occupied by Israel became a fulfillment of the "promised land." There was a fundamental shift from "Israelism" to "Judaism:" from the "State of Israel" to "Eretz Israel."²² In the state of Israel, place in society was determined by social status, therefore allowing social mobility for Arabs. In Eretz Yisrael (biblical Israel), all Jews are equal. The consequence for Israeli Arabs: "while in the 'State of Israel' one could expect social boundaries to be determined formally by citizenship, in 'Eretz Israel' membership is by kinship, and 'strangers' can never be equal in status."²³

[§] Israel's national anthem

^{**} Israel occupied the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, and the West Bank

Due to the government's ethnic nature, Arab Israelis remain second-class citizens. Arabs, "strangers" in Israel's ideal society, are not given equal rights.

Israel is premised on the idea of a Jewish state. This is clear in Israel's law and politics, and is visible in Israeli soccer. Israel is presented with a dilemma when it comes to accepting Arabs, which would consequently signify relinquishing its Jewish identity. Israel's identity is tied to Zionism, which a UN Resolution declared, "is a form of racism and racial discrimination."²⁴ Chaim Herzog defended Israel, defining Zionism as "the national movement of the Jewish people and is the modern expression of the ancient Jewish heritage. The Zionist ideal...has been, and is, an integral part of the Jewish religion."²⁵ Herzog equates an attack on Israel as an attack on Judaism: religion cannot be separated from Israeli nationality. Therefore Arabs cannot claim an Israeli identity. The Foundations of Law Act (1980) states that in the event of a "legal lacuna," the state should rule according to "principles of liberty, justice, equity and peace of the Jewish heritage."²⁶ Consequently, Arabs find their voices silenced and "terms of coexistence...unfair and their desire for change thwarted."²⁷ Arabs lack a legal base to fight widespread discrimination due to Israel's Jewish-Zionist character.²⁸ As defined by Herzog, modern Zionism is Israel's "attempt to build a society...[creating] the first and only real democratic state in a part of the world that never really knew democracy."²⁹ Due to Israel's Jewishness, Israeli Arabs distance themselves "from clear national or civil identifications."³⁰ The soccer field becomes the only place where they can identify with Israel identity.

Nevertheless, soccer is anything but apolitical. Soccer is the "last vestige"³¹ of Israeli social service with strong political connections. The major sports federations are

“related to certain political parties.”³² Due to their political origins, they “remain psychically linked to [their] parties”³³ and their names are “fraught with meaning.”³⁴ Hapoel (הפועל) translates to “the worker” and is affiliated with the Labor Party and Histadrut labor union.³⁵ Maccabi (מכבי) is translated as “hero” or “hammer,” represents the Jewish rebel army who founded the Hasmonean dynasty,³⁶ and is affiliated with Israel’s center-right³⁷ or with a bourgeoisie party, the General Zionists.³⁸ Beitar (ר"בית), also spelled Beitar) is the name of the fort where the last stand of the Bar Kochba revolt occurred against the Romans in 133 CE³⁹ and is linked to the right-wing Likud party.⁴⁰ The connection between Beitar and Likud “exemplifies the old-time link between politics and sports.”⁴¹ This makes soccer impossible to detangle from politics. Likud is the current ruling party. Some say, “by winning over Beitar fans, a politician can guarantee himself a million votes.”⁴² Beitar’s fans historically include Likud’s party leaders: Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin, and former prime minister (ex-Likud) Ehud Olmert, who “was known to have a season ticket for the team’s home games.”⁴³ Beitar, like Likud, is popular throughout Israel due to support from right-wing old settlers,^{††} Jewish working classes, and lower-middle class Oriental^{‡‡} Jewish immigrants. Beitar is a team “of the people,”⁴⁴ providing a populist base for Likud politicians.

Until 2013, Beitar was the only major team not integrated. They only hired Jewish players until the January 2013 employment of two Muslim Chechen players, Zaur Sadayev and Dzhabrail Kadiyev, on loan from FC Terek Grozny. They were two of only

^{††} Those who lived in Jerusalem before 1948

^{‡‡} North Africa and Middle Eastern Jews, as opposed to Ashkenazi (East European Jews) or Sephardic (Spanish Jews)

five non-Israeli players to ever represent the club; racist fan reaction was intense.⁴⁵ In fans' words, their reaction was "not racist, [they] just hate Arabs"⁴⁶ claiming Beitar as a "symbol for the whole country"⁴⁷ and it is a "team of Jews"⁴⁸ that should remain "pure forever."⁴⁹ To fans, Beitar represents Israel: both entities should be homogenously Jewish. Beitar's management tried to claim that it was only a small percentage of fans "destroying the atmosphere"⁵⁰ and they have made attempts to combat anti-Arab sentiments. But Moshe Zimmerman, a historian at Hebrew University who specializes in sports, has another take:

People in Israel usually try to locate Beitar Jerusalem as some kind of the more extreme fringe; this is a way to overcome the embarrassment...the fact is that the Israeli society on the whole is getting more racist, or at least more ethnocentric, and this is an expression.⁵¹

Likud's policies were reaffirmed by popular election in January 2013, with Netanyahu's reelection. Likud has been the ruling coalition for most of Israel's history with the exception of twelve years.^{§§52} Noticeably, Labor was in power during a pivotal peace settlement with Palestine: the Oslo Accords (1993), under Rabin. The Oslo Accords, however, did not include provisions for Israeli Arabs.⁵³ Likud's policies take hard lines on key issues, which directly impact Arab players.

The Israeli National Team, the Blues and Whites, has only qualified for the World Cup once (in 1970) and they failed to advance past round one.⁵⁴ Three famous Arab players have played for the team: Rifaat Turk, Walid Bdeir, and Abbas Suan. Their inclusion "is perceived as complimenting public recognition of the minority's talents by the Jewish majority."⁵⁵ The Blues and Whites are a secular national symbol, opposed to

§§ Shimon Peres (Labor, 1984-1986 and 1995-1996), Yitzhak Rabin (Labor, 1992-1995), Ehud Barak (Labor, 1999-2001), Ariel Sharon (Kadima, 2005-2006), and Ehud Olmert (Kadima, 2006-2009).

the Jewish symbols that permeate Israeli identity. The team could be the only Israeli institution where ethnicity and religion are somewhat forgotten. These Arab players “seek to downplay their national identity [instead] emphasizing their professional identity.”⁵⁶ Their goal is integration, not marginalization. However, they do not wish to surrender their Arabic identity.⁵⁷ Arab players playing for Jewish teams is seen as “a desirable path to integration into Israeli society...but is accompanied by the constant fear of assimilation.”⁵⁸ Identity is permanent; fear that Arabs who play soccer will lose their identity is unfounded. The reality is that the ethnic nature of Israel emphasizes one’s identity: the government acts to “promote the language, culture, numerical majority, economic well-being and political interests”⁵⁹ of Jewish Israelis. Arab citizens’ identities need to disappear to fit in.

Following Israel’s qualifying run for the 2006 World Cup, the rhetoric of soccer as a unifying force again emerged. Abbas Suan and Walid Bdeir both scored pivotal goals in games against Ireland and France, respectively, giving Israel World Cup hopes. On Purim, one third of Israel watched the match against Ireland, where Suan scored the equalizer in the ninetieth minute.⁶⁰ After scoring, he “dropped to his knees, kissed the ground and thanked Allah”⁶¹ before his teammates (all Jewish but Bdeir) “smothered him in a gang tackle.”⁶² Tearfully, he told a reporter after the match ended:

Before you start blessing me, I want to bless the whole of Israel and to wish everyone a happy holiday...I give thanks to God that he’s given me the chance to prove once more that in the State of Israel, we’re all one people, united as one single person. Enough already, this talk of Jews, and of Arabs. We’re one country, and we’re all in it together.⁶³

Suan was called “gibor yisrael,”⁶⁴ the hero of Israel, for his goal. His speech following the goal is significant: firstly, there is no specific religious undertone. Although he is a

devout Muslim, Suan chose to highlight Purim, the Jewish (therefore Israeli) holiday. Secondly, he emphasizes soccer as unifying in declaring, “we’re one country.” Suan had the national spotlight and he appeals for Israel to stop distinguishing between ethnicities. Israeli Soccer Federation’s president, Itche Menachem, agrees with Suan, stressing how “soccer can be a bridge to coexistence” and someday “when an Arab scores a goal, [announcers] won't say he’s an Arab. They’ll just give the name, and he will be another member of the team.”⁶⁵ This idealistic comment represents the hope that Israel will one day simply define its citizens as “Israeli,” instead of Jew or Arab.

Menachem, as other prominent figures do, sees the path to an “Israeli” identity as focused on coexistence, which should emerge between Arabs and Jews within Israel, Israel and Palestine, and Israel and the Arab world. One Arab soccer fan says coexistence is “a phrase I have no use for.”⁶⁶ He is clearly against the concept, drawing a metaphor between a horse and his rider, “one rides, the other is ridden: perfect coexistence! What I want to see is ‘us existing together.’”⁶⁷ Soccer is not a bridge to coexistence; instead, it serves as “a bridge between two pains...a real equalizing force.”⁶⁸ Equalizing not for peace, but for pain: when Arab players or teams gain national prominence, their backstories and histories become known. Through soccer, understanding becomes one further step to equality.

One such painful history is found within Israeli Arab player Walid Bdeir. He played for Israel, but “his status was always contingent upon suppression”⁶⁹ of his history. During the Kafr Qasim massacre, the “most traumatic incident in Jewish-Arab relations since the 1948 war,”⁷⁰ Israeli police massacred forty-nine Arabs; one was Bdeir’s grandfather.⁷¹ Bdeir has stated “he prefers to forget about the past and to look

ahead”⁷² and the condition he talks to reporters is that he will “never answer questions about politics.”⁷³ When a journalist asks him the reason why, he responds, “I am a soccer player, and that’s that,”⁷⁴ separating soccer from his political identity. Bdeir is criticized for his silence. Amnon Raz, a Jewish-Israeli historian, comments, “Bdeir has a role in creating [new] possibilities” for Arab Israelis, “it is impossible [for him] to ignore identity or to forget the past.”⁷⁵ Rifaat Turk, the first Arab to play for the Israeli national team, condemns Bdeir’s silence, “There’s an army in the West Bank and an occupation, but Walid says, ‘Leave me alone; I don’t talk politics.’ That’s cowardly.”⁷⁶ On the fiftieth anniversary of the Kafr Qasim massacre, the village remembered with a soccer field rally.⁷⁷ Bdeir refrained from participation in politics, even though the rally epitomized the connection of sport to the people and to politics.

At first, Suan refused to speak out on Arab issues, but now he is “acutely aware of the weight his words carry”⁷⁸ and tries to “set an example”⁷⁹ for his team. Featured on ads for the Israeli state lottery is his “quiet way” of showing “that Israeli Arabs are an integral part of Israel and are not going to disappear.”⁸⁰ Suan, like Bdeir and all Arabs in Israel, has a family history intertwined with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. His father was an internal refugee, whose ancestral land was taken by Israel in 1948.⁸¹ Their family fled Israeli forces and settled in Sakhnin. Suan reflects that he was taught “not to forget.”⁸² He believes “If Israel, our state – we’re citizens after all – believes in peace...surely it’s time for it to give back to its own citizens at least some of what’s been taken over the years.”⁸³ Suan, in a small act of resistance, stands for, but does not sing, *Hativkah* (played before all Israeli soccer games). Suan is respected and people recognize that “he can be the voice

of the [Arab] pain.”⁸⁴ Yet for all the posturing of Suan as a national hero, no actual change has occurred.

Sakhnin is defined by its participation in Arab protest and its status as the “soccer mecca”⁸⁵ of Arab Israel. Sakhnin is an Arab town in Galilee (in northern Israel) and is surrounded by Jewish settlements and military installations. It is ranked 177th out of 210 localities in Israel in terms of socio-economic levels.⁸⁶ Sakhnin has been called a “martyrs’ village” due to Land Day and the Second Intifada. Of the six Arabs killed on Land Day, ^{***} three were from Sakhnin, and of the thirteen Arabs killed in the beginning days of the Second Intifada, ^{†††} two were from Sakhnin.⁸⁷ Sakhnin is arguably the most important town for Arab Israeli soccer: Bnei Sakhnin made history by winning the Israeli cup in 2004 against Hapo’el Haifa by 4 goals to 1.⁸⁸ This led to unifying sentiments across Israel, one fan declaring, “we’re all one family now, Jews, Arabs, Haifa, Sakhnin, as long as you’re a supporter.”⁸⁹ The headlines were exuberant, calling it “an achievement which will open doors.”⁹⁰ Commentators celebrated, one writing that the win represents “a new chapter in the cultural conflict between the Arab and Jewish citizens... [it] sowed pride and new hope in the Arab population.”⁹¹ Equality doesn’t just come from playing soccer. By winning, Israeli Arabs gained a platform from which they could argue for inclusion.

The same week that Sakhnin won, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) conducted an assault on Rafah, a densely populated refugee camp in southern Gaza. Inevitably, two days later, Arab enthusiasm “took on a different hue.”⁹² Kul al-Arab, a leading Israeli Arabic newspaper, warned against exploiting the win for “propaganda purposes”⁹³

^{***} Israeli Arabs organized in a general strike across the country in 1976.

^{†††} After protests following Ariel Sharon’s controversial visit to Jerusalem’s holiest site.

because the win would create “a gilded wrapping to decorate the ugliness of [Israeli] discrimination.”⁹⁴ Rafah witnessed “a level of destruction unprecedented,”⁹⁵ reportedly leaving forty-seven Palestinians dead. The Human Rights Watch documented violations of human rights abuses by the IDF: they “destroyed houses, roads, and large fields extensively without evidence that the destruction was in response to absolute military needs.”⁹⁶ While Arabs living in Rafah are not the same as Arabs living in Israel, this was a fortuitous overlap. One columnist wrote the “murder of [Rafah’s] innocent sons in their homes...did not prevent this nation from rejoicing and celebrating the achievement of [Sakhnin]. The love...of the Palestinian people from Rafah stands fast.”⁹⁷ Not only was Sakhnin’s victory significant for Arab Israelis, it carried importance in the Palestinian world. The timing of the Rafah assault and Sakhnin’s win highlights the nature of the Arab struggle inside and outside Israel. The win served as a distraction from the harsh reality of the greater Israeli-Palestinian struggle.

There is a question of identity for Arab Israeli citizens in relation to Palestine. This paper has mainly focused on Arab efforts within Israel: integration and equal status to Jewish citizens. In making the distinction between Arabs living inside Israel as “Israeli Arabs” instead of “Palestinians,” the paper focuses on internal rather than external conflict. Consequently, it is important to note that Arab nationality is connected to the Arab world that has vowed and attempted to destroy Israel. Israeli Arabs have difficulty fitting in both the Arab and Israeli worlds, as expressed by Ghazal Abu Raya:

Just as you didn’t choose to be Jewish, I didn’t choose to be Arab. But I am an Arab. And, I am an Israeli... Yet, to the Arabs, we’re not Arab enough and to Jewish Israelis, we’re not Israeli enough. That leaves our identity damaged, crippled, incomplete. It’s not easy when your state is at war with your people, and when your people are at war with your state.⁹⁸

For a state founded on the concept of identity, questions of damaged identity cannot be easily reconciled or solved anytime soon. The notion that soccer erases all identity, as Arab players and teams, commentators and political theorists attempt to demonstrate, is difficult to reconcile with reality. “Soccer gives an illusion of equality”⁹⁹ for ninety minutes, but then the existing inequalities return. Israel is a Jewish state with Jewish character. Until this changes, finding equality for Arab Israelis proves challenging.

Ghas bin annak is a term in local Arabic lore in Sakhnin, translated as “we’re here, like it or not,”¹⁰⁰ which succinctly represents the status of Arab Israelis. Soccer helped Sakhnin gain national prominence and brought up inclusion, equality and progress. The field has potential to blur ethnic-national distinctions between Israeli Jews and Arabs. But distinctions are still made clear. Equality can exist with soccer, but placing hopes of unity on the sport is dangerous. Its symbolic power outweighs its actual power for change. The question becomes how to translate this symbolism. The major impetus is Israel’s ethnic democracy. The prevailing consensus in Jewish Israel is that Arab Israelis are a “contradiction.” One anonymous Jewish citizen expresses this (“you” referring to Arab Israelis):

I sincerely don’t see how [coexistence] can work if you don’t accept our goal, our vision – a Jewish state with Jewish character. Do you fit into that? Can you fit into that? Look at what happens on Independence Day – we celebrate the creation of the state while you mourn your loss, your tragedy – you call it your catastrophe, your *Naqba*. How can you be part of the state if you mourn its creation?¹⁰¹

Jewish Israelis emphasize the fact that Israel is a Jewish state and if Arabs are not content with this, there are twenty-one other Arab states. Israel is paranoid about its future given its history; the relationship between Israel and its neighbors, fraught with war and terrorism, adds context to the difficulty Israel faces in accepting Arabs. Yet the notion

that all Arabs are equivalent is premised on a racist concept that groups all Arab states together and the controversial idea that Arab Israelis no longer have a right to their ancestral land. Israel remains in a state of war with the Arab world. Until there is peace, conflict cannot be isolated from the Arab Israeli identity.

The roots of Israel's soccer league in political parties can serve to further different arguments whether soccer can serve as a unifying force. On one side, soccer's strong links to Israeli politics could mean the easier facilitation of the progress made by Arab players and teams. In spite of the hope that progress on the pitch can be translated into political equality, ethnicity is too vital to Israeli society: it is "imminent in its nature, identity, institutional organization, and public policy."¹⁰² Soccer can be viewed as a celebration of a collective Israeli identity but on and off the field, Jewish and Arab identity is permanent. Ideally, Israeli identity will shift. This shift should be towards a bilingual and secular Israel and should allow for active participation by all ethnic and religious groups. Soccer only reflects the ethno-centric nature of Israeli politics and society without the power to influence actual change in this nature. If Israel is willing to let a new identity emerge, there is hope for its Arab minority. Until that day, Israeli soccer will continue to function as a place where a hope for a new Israel develops without any real equality.

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