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Is it time to red card Israeli football?

The participation of six clubs, linked to West Bank settlements, in the Israeli football league demonstrates how the Israeli Football Association (IFA) and FIFA are allowing football to be used to normalise the Israeli government's illegal occupation of Palestinian land. According to the Palestinian FA, by failing to abide by its own rules, FIFA is complicit in the annexation of Palestinian land because of the funds it provides to the IFA to develop Israeli football, at the same as restricting the development of Palestinian football.

FIFA's rules state that any club affiliated to a FIFA member may not play on the territory of another football association without the other association's permission. FIFA acted on this rule when Russia occupied Crimea and attempted to incorporate Ukrainian clubs into the Russian league. Russia eventually relented and complied with FIFA rules by setting up its own leagues in Crimea that lay outside FIFA control. Other examples of occupation that have been sanctioned by FIFA include Armenian occupation of Nagorno Karabakh and the Turkish state's occupation of Northern Cyprus.

The Israeli settlements are built on territory that is viewed as illegally occupied under international law. The international community (principally, the UN) recognises Israel's territory up to the 'Green Line' (the pre-1967 border), but since 1967, 137 illegal settlements with a population of 500,000 have been established across the West Bank. The 2.5 million Palestinians living there are restricted to ever smaller areas and subjected to different rules to the Israeli settlers, a situation some describe as 'apartheid'.

The Israeli FA's initial response was that FIFA had no authority to define what was Israeli territory, that FIFA was not a forum for politics, and that the issue of territory should be decided by the UN. However, the Israeli FA failed to notice that the UN Resolution 2334, adopted in 2016, identified the settlements as being outside Israel and in Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) and thus were illegal in international law.

The six settlement teams, typically formed in the later 1990s, are all small, semi-amateur and playing in the lower Israeli leagues. Some of the teams are registered in Israel but play their games in the settlements, with other teams registered in the OPTs but playing some of their games in Israel. A Human Rights Watch report in 2016 identified there were another 26 settlements with organised football leagues, and a further 17 settlements that contained non-FIFA football facilities for its residents. Palestinians are prevented from entering the settlements, unless they have special permits, with the clubs not letting Palestinians to engage in any football-related events. The settlements receive financial support from the Israeli state and regional councils with some of the six IFA-affiliated clubs receiving support from the Israeli FA. The recreational facilities offered by the settlements improves their sustainability and their attractiveness to potential residents.

In 2015 the Palestinian FA first complained to FIFA about the settlement clubs and restrictions placed on Palestinian teams traveling between the West Bank and Gaza, and

teams visiting the West Bank. In addition to the travel restrictions, the PFA highlighted how the importation of football equipment including kit, boots and balls was often prevented. The PFA subsequently withdrew their complaint in exchange for FIFA appointing a 'Monitoring Committee Israel-Palestine' to oversee Israel's lifting its restrictions on all aspects of Palestinian soccer. Initially it seemed that Israel was going to lift travel restrictions when it allowed a team from the West Bank, Al-Ahli, to travel to Gaza to play against Al Shejaia in the Palestine Cup final. However, Israeli support was short-lived; the PFA cancelled the return match after Israel refused travel permits for four of the squad. All the other proposals to lift restrictions subsequently evaporated.

Since then, FIFA has vacillated with the 'Monitoring Committee' extending its mandate in October 2016, January 2017 and March 2017. Frustrated at the lack of progress, various Palestinian organisations subsequently called for the dissolution of the Committee citing that, given its only remit was to act upon Israeli violations, it had failed to achieve any progress on any of the issues.

In October 2017, FIFA announced that it was not going to take a position on the future of the six settlement clubs. They cited the 'exceptional complexity and sensitive' and political nature of the subject, and declared the matter closed. In the light of FIFA's refusal to act, the Palestinian FA turned to the Court of Arbitration for Sport with an appeal date set for November. However the appeal was postponed with no reason given and no date set to reconvene.

FIFA could have argued that it had no choice but to act against the six clubs given its own statutes and the position of the UN; the reason why they have not acted is remains unclear. The Israelis have repeatedly claimed that the Palestinians are politicising football. However, it is the Israelis who are doing this by allowing teams based in illegally occupied territory to play in its domestic league. By doing nothing FIFA are giving de facto support to the Israeli state in its occupation of Palestinian land.

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