Football disturbances in the Arab world have important political implications. (1) They are expressions of youth rebelling against patriarchal power. Young fans who started to go to the stadiums with people of their own age rather than their fathers, experienced a new autonomy from parental tutelage. Football matches evolved as the most important arena for youth gathering outside patriarchal control. (2) In the autocratic Arab world, arenas for political participation are few. Football matches though, represent a rare alternative where political messages can be publicly expressed. This has turned football matches of the Arab world into barometers of political trends. And this has made football stadiums contested fields where supporters with different political sympathies struggle each other, as well as struggle security forces. (3) Football disturbances may be exploited by regimes. The Arab Spring also involved a struggle over political narratives. As a counter-insurgency strategy autocratic authorities would warn that democratization was dangerous as it could lead to a collapse of law and order in society. Jordan, which this report focuses on, has a history of ethnic-based football riots. These riots have been referred to by Jordanian officials as reminders of the threats to stability, security and national unity of Jordan. Notably, similar phrases were used by Jordanian regime officials to warn against pro-democracy protests.

Introduction

In a special issue on the Arab Spring in the journal Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism autumn 2011, counter-revolution strategies of the authoritarian Arab regimes was discussed. Historically a crown argument of the autocrats of the Arab world was always to warn against fitna, chaos, the end of security and stability that could be the result if the countries were to democratize. The balance between centrifugal forces of sectarianism, ethnicity and nationalism could be disrupted with catastrophic results for the citizens. The threat of the ethnic genie coming out of the bottle was not only an argument. It was also a political strategy. National sub-identities were actively manipulated by autocrats, to preserve their own power monopoly. Democratization efforts in the Gulf were presented by Gulf authorities to their citizens as part of an Iranian effort at regional Shia hegemony. To save Bahrain from Shias allegedly behind

protests masked as pro-democracy protests, Saudi Arabia had to invade the country. Equally in Saudi Arabia itself, when activists called for a “day of rage”, the regime presented this as a Shia conspiracy, with Iran acting behind the scene to deepen sectarian tensions within the country. When uprisings did not break out in Algeria and Palestine a common explanation was that the population in these countries had memories of the costs and sufferings of previous violent conflicts. Memories of the costs of previous uprisings made the threshold to start another one higher. This also made it a survival strategy for authorities in these regimes to make sure that people were reminded of these experiences.

This is highly relevant for Jordan. Since the civil war in Jordan in 1970, whenever demonstrators have called for political reforms, the answer from the regime has been that this could be a threat to the stability and national unity of the kingdom. More than anything else in Jordan, football riots have played a role in preserving the memory of the civil war. Whenever the two teams representing the two nationalisms of Jordan play each other: Wihdat representing Palestinianism versus Faisali representing East Bank nationalism, two competing types of nationalists chants are heard at the stadia, accompanied by street-fights between Palestinians and Jordanian nationalists. Whether these football riots are orchestrated or not is not the issue here. The point is how football riots work politically. In Jordan, as could be observed during the Arab spring, football riots have served as a reminder of as an alleged “threat to national unity,” as a warning against unrest from democratization protests, and thus as a legitimization of political status quo.

The Black September luggage of Jordanian-Palestinian relations in Jordan

Historically, Jordan never was a political community. It was made a country because of British interests in controlling the unruly tribal people of some 300 000 living between the desert steppes of Syria, Palestine and Iraq. Different from the Arabs of the Arab peninsula who had sided with Britain during the First World War to bring the Ottoman Empire down, the Bedouins of Transjordan, wanting to preserve status quo rather than have borders limit their freedom of movement, sided with the Ottoman rulers. However, while the Britons faced rebellions in Iraq, Egypt and Syria, their colonial rule in Transjordan turned out to be a great success. The key to this success was the benevolent form of indirect rule practiced, through the shaykhs of the tribes, not in stead of them. This is relevant to understand the alliance with the football club Faisali and the Jordanian throne, which will be discussed later in the report. Abdullah bin Husayn, the son of the sharif of Mecca, was brought in as the ruler of the tribal confederacies, ruling under British supremacy receiving a monthly salary and a budget to administer the area. When the nomadic tribes gradually settled, they were handed plots of land and adjusted to a mixed system of pasturing and cultivation. Moreover, the sons of sheikhs were recruited to military desert control, that was administered by the Britons. This made the former nomadic raiders become the core of the armed forces of Transjordan. The armed forces

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was a professional army, well trained and with a modern weaponry. When the Kingdom of Jordan was established as an independent state in 1946, after the British mandate of Transjordan, tribal opposition had been transformed into a founding element of the new state. The problem was the path dependence that the co-option of dominant tribes implied. Jordan was built as a state-building project, not a nation-building project. Rather than nationalizing tribal identities, the tribes tribalised the nation. Sub groups – co-opted tribes – had been privileged at the expense of others. Since then until today, various sub-national identities have been sustained within the Jordan regime. And so the Palestinians, who were later granted citizenships in Jordan, were never really integrated, as the tribal core of the state asserted itself time and again.

The demographic Palestinization of Jordan

In 1948, with the establishment of Israel and the Arab defeat in the Israeli – Arab war, no country received more Palestinian refugees than Jordan. After the war King Abdullah of Jordan annexed the West Bank – which had until then been part of the British mandate of Palestine. With the annexation of the West Bank, and the massive influx of refugees from within what became Israel’s border in 1948, Jordan was demographically Palestinized. The 340,000 indigenous Jordanians saw 450,000 West Bank Palestinians and 450,000 Palestinian refugees become not only new inhabitants of Jordan, but also new citizens as Abdullah thought of himself as the king of Palestinians and East Bank Jordanians alike and granted the Palestinians citizenship.

There was a huge difference in the level of social and economic integration in Jordan between the two different categories of Palestinians: the West Bank Palestinians and the refugees that had escaped or been forced out of the land area that became Israel in 1948. The Palestinians of West Bank origin became the new upper middle class in the urban areas of Jordan, being more educated than the Jordanians of Bedouins origin. They found employment as civil servants while others came to dominate the Jordanian business centre, constituting a form of Palestinian exile bourgeoisie. Meanwhile the other Palestinians, the refugees living in isolated refugee camps, experienced famine during their first years of exile. They were only rescued by the UN Relief and Works Agency providing them food and shelter, with an annual budget of 27 dollars per refugee.

When Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967, this partly represented a moment of liberation for the refugees. The Arab monarchies, like Jordan, were weakened, while the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the PLO, was taken over by Palestinian guerrilla groups, mainly based in Jordan. The PLO guerrilla groups could hardly absorb all the refugees streaming to their offices to take part in the armed struggle. Fatah, the main PLO group, had as an explicit strategy to engage Israel in armed struggle from Israel’s neighboring states, thereby forcing these states to participate on their side against Israel, a tactics that was largely successful until 1970. Other

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5 Alon, p. 157.
7 Cleveland, p. 347.
PLO groups wanted to first bring down by armed force what they saw as reactionary regimes of the Arab world, like Jordan, and subsequently unite the Arab world against Israel.

In September 1970 King Hussein had had enough of both tactics and cracked down on the PLO in Jordan. The PLO had their headquarters in the Wihdat camp at the outskirts of Amman. The camp was the one that was dealt the heaviest blows as the Palestinian resistance movement in Jordan was crushed, eventually fleeing to Lebanon. The Palestinian refugee camps, and more than anywhere else, the Wihdat camp, were in ruins. From the ashes of this camp, to be elaborated upon later in the report, the most successful sport phenomenon in Palestinian history was born.

The two nationalisms of Jordan

The 1970 civil war crushed the illusion of Jordan as a united country. From then on, two nationalisms have lived side by side in Jordan: the East Bank Jordanian one alongside Palestinian nationalism. There was a huge imbalance between these two nationalisms. The core of East Bank nationalism was anti-Palestinianism. It represented those who regarded the Palestinians as ungrateful for the hospitality of Jordan having granted them refuge as well as citizenship. Some saw the Palestinians as traitors.\(^9\) Such attitudes also affected the policy of the Jordanian regime towards its Palestinian citizens. After the 1970 civil war, an East Bank first policy was employed. It meant that the Palestinians from then on confronted innumerable problems within the Jordanian bureaucracy, to have a driving license, a passport, register a business, etc. Ideologically, neo-Jordanian nationalism emphasized values cleansed of what it was to be Palestinian. PLO’s nationalism had been secular, pan-Arabic and leftist. Neo-Jordanian nationalism emphasized tribal roots and values, Islamic tradition and Hashemite loyalty. The room for a middle ground had disappeared with the civil war. As the tribal roots of the monarchy asserted itself, the Palestinians, especially the camp refugees, came under heavy surveillance. The Palestinians were discriminated because of their national identity. Nevertheless, the exclusion from any middle ground, the increased segregation and discrimination, inadvertently strengthened internal Palestinian social interaction, internal solidarity, and thus also Palestinian national identity. Suppressing Palestinian nationalism inadvertently ended up with enforcing it.

From then on football emerged as about the only arena where these nationalisms could be openly, publicly expressed: Wihdat FC representing Palestinian nationalism, and Faisali FC anti-Palestinian, East Bank nationalism.

Faisali Football Club, the carrier of the torch of East Bank nationalism

Faisali is the oldest football club in Jordan. It was founded during the British Mandate, in 1932. From 1957 and 20 more years they were unrivalled in Jordan, winning the league every single year. Faisali was the team of the Adwan tribe. This is one of the most powerful tribes in Jordan, in the Balqa region where also Amman is located. During the British Mandate, King Abdullah, the ruler under British supervision, recruited members from the Adwan tribe into the elite

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troops of the Transjordanian army. This meant that close ties had been forged between the throne and Faisali – the tribe and the club – long before the influx of Palestinians to Jordan. But with the demographic Palestinization of Jordan, the club gained a new meaning, as a symbol of the royal - tribal alliance where the Palestinians played no part. Its success in football reflected the hegemonic power of this alliance in Jordan.

**Wihdat Football Club, the club of “the Palestinian republic of Wihdat”**

The football club Wihdat was, as already mention, from the Palestinian refugee camp that had been the headquarters of the PLO during the civil war, and that had been the most heavily damaged camp. “Al-Jumhuriya – the republic” local Palestinians used to call the camp. Wihdat Football Club evolved as a result of the activities of the youth centers established in the camps by UNRWA, the UN agency administrating the camps. Initially the various refugee camps organized their own separate league system, outside the national Jordanian system. But from 1975 on, also teams from the Palestinian refugee camps were admitted into the Jordanian league. Because of the severe suppression of any hint at Palestinian nationalism after 1970, the football matches of Wihdat became exceptional. The taste of victory through Wihdat’s matches was an unknown, unique experience for the Palestinian refugees. While most matches in the Jordanian league attracted an audience of a couple of hundreds, the Amman stadium was packed with 20 000 supporters when Wihdat played. And not only in Amman, wherever Wihdat played in Jordan, the Palestinian refugee population rushed to the stadiums. Wihdat became a symbol of Palestinianness, and also a brand, with insignia of the club being visible all over Jordan wherever there were Palestinians. The socks, shirt and trousers of Wihdat were in black, green, red and white, the same as the Palestinian flag. There was a heavily enforced law against exposing or supporting Palestinian nationalism but there was no law against supporting a football team of the Jordanian league. A special honk-honk from cars came to be associated with Wihdat. And the green Wihdat shirt was everywhere to be seen. Wihdat became an unequivocal expression of ones’ Palestinianness, the identity elsewhere forbidden.

Each year Wihdat climbed within the league system. In 1980 they sensationally removed the dominating Faisali team from the throne, winning the league. Since then a form of symbolic war between the supporters inside the stadiums, and brawls outside, have been an integrated part of the matches between Wihdat and Faisali.

**Jordanian – Palestinian clashes during football derbies**

The victories of Wihdat released tremendous national pride among the Palestinian supporters of the team, celebrating victories as if they were in deed national victories. “Wihdat is something holy, it is Palestine. ... When Wihdat lose, Palestine loses,” said an inhabitant in the Wihdat refugee camp. The role of the football team in raising the moral and self-respect of the refugees was explicit in supporter chants: “Arrange the chairs, arrange the chairs, the green Wihdat raise our heads,” (suffu al karasi, suffu al karasi, al Wihdat al akhdar, biyirfa al raasi),

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10 Alon, p 152.
the Wihdatis chanted. At the football arena the refugees reformulated their identity, putting the stigma as those who had abandoned their land and lost their honour behind them, replacing it with that of the *fedayyin*. “We don’t want wheat or sardines, we want bombs” (*ma biddna thiin wa la sardin, bidna ‘anabil*), they chanted. But references to armed struggle would inadvertently in the Jordanian context be interpreted as a reference to the 1970 civil war as much as to the Palestinian liberation struggle. When Wihdat played Faisali, chants of both supporter groups would also target the opponent. “The whole Wihdat sells tomatoes,” Faisali supporters chanted, ridiculing Wihdat for its cheapness – being the location for the largest and cheapest tomato marked in the Amman area. “We are all Palestinians,” Wihdat supporters answered, and sometimes “We are all *fedayyiin*” (guerrilla soldiers).<sup>12</sup>

After the first intifada Jordan withdraw its claims over the West Bank. This meant that Jordan abandoned its ambition to represent Palestinians in the West Bank and Jordan alike. And with the Oslo-process PLO was internationally recognized as the sole representative of the Palestinians. With the prospects for a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza, a new trend could be observed during the Wihdat – Faisali derbies. Whereas expressions of Palestinian nationalism had reigned after the civil war, anti-Palestinian East Bank nationalism more explicitly entered the field. This drew international attention following an American Embassy report leaked by Wikileaks from a derby played in Zarqa in 2009.<sup>13</sup> Faisali supporters had persistently yelled: “*Wahid itnen, talaqha Abu Hussein* - one, two, divorce her Abu Hussein.” Abu Hussein is a reference to the Jordanian king, King Abdullah, his eldest son being named Hussein. “Divorce her you father of Hussein, and we send you a couple of Jordanian girls to marry instead.” East Bank nationalist Faisali supporters, in a startling violation of political taboos, thus chanted derogatory remarks at the throne. King Abdullah was married to a Palestinian, Queen Rania. “*Talaqha, ya abu Hussein*,” the king should divorce his Palestinian wife, and by implication, Jordan should be separated from the Palestinians. “We don’t want to see any Palestinians,’ thousands of Faisali supporters also chanted in Zarqa. The match was interrupted and cancelled as Wihdat players were bombarded with bottles and items from Faisali supporters.

In spite of the seriousness of the incident, which was notably underreported in Jordanian media, the disturbances during the Wihdat – Faisali derby the following year, in Amman December 2010, were even worse.<sup>14</sup> After the match, won by Wihdat, Wihdat supporters were kept inside the stadium, as part of ordinary procedure. But then stones were hurled at the remaining Wihdat-fans, from the Faisali-supporters outside. The situation got out of hand, creating panic, unrest and clashes, cars were set on fire, and property damaged. Two hundred and fifty people were injured, many hospitalized. After the match the Jordanian minister of

<sup>12</sup> Interview by author with Sobhi Ibrahim, vice President of Wihdat, Amman, June 1997.


<sup>14</sup> Omari, Raed. ‘Probe continues into Friday football-related violence.’ [Jordan Times, 2010](http://www.jordantimes.com/?news=32549)
Saad Hayel Sror, blamed Wihdat for the disturbances: “Those who tried to take advantage of the incident, raising provocative statements, should instead have sought to ease the tension and restore calm. Their statements pose a threat to Jordan’s rule of law and its integral unity.” Few doubted that the minister had the director of Wihdat, Tareq Khouri, in mind. Khouri said in an interview that he had been furious with the darak, the Gendarmerie special police forces.15 “We won the game and were celebrating. All of a sudden the darak started to push and hit our fans. I felt that a disaster happened, and that there would be many killed,” said Khoury. “99% of the darak are Faisali sympathizers, thinking that those of Palestinian origin are taking everything in the country, in stead of themselves taking control,” he continued. The unrest subsequently spread to other places in Amman. The Wihdat camp was bathed with tear gas. The darak forces wanted to make the heart of the Palestinians suffer, according Khoury. Khoury was later sentenced to prison, related to the disturbances in Zarqa, but was pardoned as part of a larger prisoner amnesty. Khoury is greeted with his own chant from Wihdat fans every time Wihdat play.

The football disturbances following the derbies between Wihdat and Faisali may on the one hand be interpreted as a clash between people of two different ethno-national belongings: Palestinians versus East Bankers. On the other hand, the disturbances and the aftermath may also be understood as a clash of narratives. Notably, much of the same rhetoric used to describe football disturbances were used by Jordanian regime officials during the democracy protests in the spring of 2011, referring to “the threat to national unity”.

**From football unrest to democratization unrest—“threatening the national unity”**

The different perspectives of the Wihdat president Tareq Khoury and Saaed Hayel Sror, the interior minister, on the football unrest were soon after the incidents given new meaning. Khoury saw the unrest as orchestrated by the most anti-Palestinian segment of the Jordanian security apparatus, implying that they used football matches to teach the Palestinians a lesson. Sror claimed that the unrest threatened the unity of Jordan. The East Bank Jordanian against Palestinian clashes was a threat to the rule of law and the unity of Jordan, which in Jordan always was a reference to the 1970 civil war. Notably, the Amman football unrest happened only a week before Mohammed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor, set fire to himself against the harassment of police and government officials, the spark that led to the domino effect of the Arab Spring. Also elsewhere in the Arab world a similar clash of narratives occurred during the Arab uprisings. One side implied that democratization could lead to unrest and harm the unity of the nation state. The other side claimed that the regime actually was active in instigating unrest, producing what they were warning against in order to preserve status quo. The masses might wanted the fall of the dictatorships, but less people wanted so if the price to pay was civil war.

Jordan is not a democratic, constitutional democracy. The King nominates the representatives of the Upper House, and the government is not responsible to the parliament. The King may

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15 Interview with author, Amman, May 2014.
dissolve the parliament whenever he likes and govern by decree. Additionally, the electoral system is heavily gerrymandered in disfavor of the Palestinians. Although the Palestinians constitute a majority of the Jordanian population, maximum 25% of the parliament may be elected from the areas where the Palestinians live. Within the ethnic homogenous Karak electoral district there are 50,000 inhabitants who elect six members to the parliament (only East Bankers). From the largely homogenous Palestinian electoral district of Zarqa, 500,000 Palestinians elect seven representatives. In other words, the vote of one East Banker equals ten Palestinian votes.

This implies that democratization could be regarded as threatening for those within the East Bank tribes and elites who benefit from lack of democracy and nepotism. During the spring of 2011 in Jordan, after Tunisia and Egypt had had their revolutions, when democratization protests started in Jordan, the demonstrators had their counter-protestors from the very start. In February 2011 a letter signed by 36 tribal leaders was published in Jordanian media. Echoing chants from Faisali fans against Queen Rania, the letter called upon the King to “return lands and farms given to the Yassin family (Rania’s family). The land belongs to the Jordanian people.” Moreover, Queen Rania was accused of “corruption, stealing money from the Treasury and manipulation in order to promote her public image – against the Jordanians’ people’s will,” it was written in the letter. The letter also included an unprecedented warning for the King: “King Abdullah has to stop his wife and her family from taking advantage of their power, otherwise the crown might be in danger.” Offending the royal family is forbidden by law in Jordan and could lead to prison terms of up to three years. But the signatories of the letter were powerful, the initiative being from a committee of tribal army officers, the National Committee for Retired Officers. They could not send generals to jail, said one of the signatories, Ali Habashneh, who was explicitly against a democratic, constitutional monarchy in Jordan: “We are against democratization,” said Habashneh. Democratization – a change in the election system where the votes from the Palestinian areas would count the same as the votes from Jordanian areas – “could lead to civil war.”

Because East Bank nationalists warned that democratization could lead to civil war, the democratization activists were extremely conscious about not being associated with Palestinians. In March 2011 demonstrations really took off in Amman. Palestinians were strikingly absent from the peaceful protests where demonstrators called for democracy and political reforms. Some demonstrators even complained about the absence of Palestinian demonstrators. In spite of this the pro-democracy demonstrators were met by counter-democracy demonstrators waving the Jordanian flag, as if the democracy movement was a

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19 Interview with author, Amman, March 2011.
Palestinian one. These counter-protestors called themselves “Call of the nation.” On March 25 2011 the camp of the demonstrators was attacked by the counter-protestors. Some 200 men attacked the couple of thousand democracy activists, injuring 160 democracy demonstrators and killing one. Observers saw the “Call of the Nation” as thugs that reportedly had been bused into the capital by elements within the security apparatus. The Jordan expert Curtis Ryan commented that the thugs saw themselves as “saving the monarchy from the Palestinians revolutionaries who were ‘occupying’ their capital.”

Two days after the 25th of March attack on the demonstrators in Amman, King Abdullah went to meet tribal leaders where he commented on the situation. “The most important thing is our national unity, which must not be touched upon” the King said, “we need to stay away from any behavior that could affect our unity.” The King could be interpreted as alleging that it was the political reform movement rather than those violently attacking them, that were threatening the national unity. After the attack on the protest camp, the momentum of the protests withered.

In 2013, when asked what was important in democracy, more Jordanians answered political stability rather than free elections. If the price to pay for democracy was civil war, it was better to preserve the status quo. Related to this it could be asserted that the almost ritualized display of football hooliganism during Wihdat and Faisali matches serve a political function. Laurie A. Brand, a leading expert on Jordan and the Palestinians, already in 1988 made the claim that football disturbances served East Bank Jordanian interests. After the civil war in 1970, there never really was anything to fear from the Palestinians in Jordan, according to Brand. The Palestinians did not work for separatism, not to bring down the throne. The danger was always democratic mobilization, where the common interests of ordinary Jordanians and Palestinians, against nepotism and corruption, would threaten the authorities. Labeling any democratization movement as Palestinian, and even attacking it to produce a violence that could be presented as equally dangerous to the rule of law, stability and unity of the nation, would have the effect of de-legitimizing it. Low key disturbances, with a manageable level of communal conflict, would thus serve two interests: reminding the population of the danger of ethnic conflict and sectarianism, while legitimizing the monarchy that with its Hashemite roots transcended East Bank and West Bank nationalism.

Football in Jordan 2014: endless struggle over national symbols

Today, when Wihdat and teams of East Bank Jordanian origin play, the matches are still loaded with struggles over national symbols. Thus, some years ago Wihdat played a match in Tunisia in a regional cup, and were crushed seven to one. This tremendously pleased anti-Wihdat...

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21 Ibid.

supporters in Jordan who started to chant “Wihdat will not win before MacDonalds sells mulukhiya,” whenever Wihdat played. Mulukhiya is a grassplant, from which a special dish is made. Although the dish is wide spread in the Middle East, in Jordan it is something that the Palestinians eat, and the East Bank Jordanians of Bedouin origin do not eat at all. This has made mulukhiya a symbol of Palestinian-ness in Jordan. When, soon after the defeat in Tunisia, Wihdat won the Jordanian cup, their captain, Rafat Ali, a Palestinian, brought a leaf of the mulukhiya plant. When he received the cup, he put the mulukhiya leaf in the cup, in front of the tv-cameras - and pretended to drink from it. “Mie mie, Rafat Ali, sub al mulukhiya, - Rafat Ali drank the mulukhye,” Wihdat supporters now chant to commemorate Ali and the cup victory. When play Faisali, the Faisali supporters answer: “Al mulukhiya wa al jisr – take your mulukhiya and leave Jordan by the bridge.” On the 23 of May 2014, Wihdat played a crucial match in Amman. “Grasseaters, grasseaters,” chanted the supporters of the opposing side, referring to the mulukhiya and the peasant tradition of many of the Palestinian refugees. “Shepherds, shepherds”, answered the Wihdat supporters - referring to the Bedouin tradition of their opponents. As Wihdat won the match, they also won the Jordanian league title of 2014. A Wihdat supporter then stormed the pitch, with the darak police forces running after him, to the tremendous enjoyment of the Wihdat supporters. The supporter waved his hands in the air, carrying a branch with the leaves of mulukhiya.

Why football?

What is it with football, also compared to other forms of sports, that makes it such a battleground over identity and ethnic, national and political symbols? As will be further elaborated upon below, some of the current circumstances in the Middle East make the region especially fertile for football matches to be politicized. But first, there might also be some universal features of the game that makes football especially inflaming.

Football today constitutes the form of popular culture with the greatest worldwide appeal. Popular culture in general reflects popular sentiments and thus main features of culture and ideology of the times. Thus, historians studying progressive struggle in and through sport, regard popular culture as a central element in political processes and not as political marginal. In the same way as sport reflects dominant ideas of society, it also reflects struggle. The idea of football as a “weapons of mass distraction”, the so-called bread and circus view, has thus been challenged by a wide range of scholars. Football rather reflects social mechanisms, not to mention George Orwell’s often quoted dictum that football is “war minus the shooting.”

According to Armstrong and Young, two of the worlds leading football theorists, the issue with football is that for football fans regularly following their teams, games are always filled with deep passions of love and hate. This is related to the nature of the game. What the game is really about is to thrash the enemy. The supporters have a role in this, supporting their own, opposing the other. Football therefor demands a partisan involvement from those who are devoted supporters. To have success there is a need to be antagonistic, offensive and abusive.

because the aim is that the other side should fail in order for your own side to be victorious. Chants and supporter behaviour means to participate in an extended struggle, a ritualised symbolic warfare, so to speak.

Moreover, in the Arab world, this intrinsic inflaming dimension of football has merged with idiosyncratic features of the region that have contributed to further increase its inflaming effect.

**Football and the revolt against patriarchal power**

One aspect of the Arab spring was that it started as an uprising against patriarchal power, against the power of elderly men over the young. Political unrest very often takes place when the youth segment of a population is unnaturally large. The larger proportion of youth, the larger the probability of social and political unrest, demographic studies have found. In the Arab world, the factors that contribute to this clash of generations have been omnipresent. 60% of the population in the Arab world are less than 25 years old. The population growth is double the world average. The youth generation is much more educated than the parent and grandparent generation, but this is not reflected in the labour market.

The Arab world is the most autocratic region in the world. The gates to ordinary institutionalized democratic political participation have been closed for the public. This has made primary solidarity groups based on patriarchal power within families and clans, and later on, religiously based groups, alternative avenues for political participation. But neither of these arenas has been satisfactory for frustrated youth experiencing an age group bonding, based on their shared feelings of having their career opportunities and life fulfilments hampered. The football stadiums have in this situation become the single most important arena for youth to congregate and develop internal solidarity ties within their own age segment. As young fans started to go to the stadiums with people of their own age rather than their fathers, they experienced a new autonomy from parental tutelage. Football matches evolved as the most substantial form of patriarch-independent, autonomous youth gathering.

Age group bonding through football has been referred to as ‘ordered segmentation’ or ‘the Bedouin factor’ of football. The age groups defend and control territories at the football stadiums. When involved with conflicts with external groups – like opposing fans or the police – largely independent segments of different youth communities gathered at the football terraces unite. In the autocratic Arab world, football has thus come to merge two rebellions: against patriarchal structures at the home sphere and autocratic structures at the public sphere. Youth autonomy from parental tutelage could be experienced and simultaneously


political messages publicly expressed. The makes football today an important barometer of political trends, not only in Jordan but in the whole Middle East as we shall see in the next section.

**Football as a barometer of political trends in the Middle East**

In Algeria, it was during football matches that the main slogan in favour of recognition of the Berber language was first observed in the so-called Berber Spring in the 1980s, with banners saying “We are not Arabs, Berber language in schools.” In the 1990s the football stadia were the main locations for people fed up with the FLN government, expressing their dismay through slogans and banners calling for “bouts for Australia” and stating “we don’t want to go to the army.” During the Arab Spring, in January 2011, the source of the main riots that broke out was a post-match scuffle in the Algerian capital Algiers, between football fans and police. Five people died and hundreds were injured, with costs of more than 1 billion Algerian dinar (10 million Euro) in material damage. The incident led to all football matches to be suspended for a month after the riots.31

In Syria in 2004, one of the greatest Kurdish uprisings in modern times started in Qamishli, with supporters waving Kurdish flags and chanting support for the American president George Bush, who had asked Syria to stop supporting Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Police then shot into the crowd, killing nine Kurdish spectators. This triggered a riot that spread all the way to Damascus, with tens of more Kurds being killed, and also outside Syria’s borders with protests outside Syrian embassies in Europe.32

In Lebanon the football league has been played without supporters since the mini-war between Israel and the Lebanese Shia resistance group Hizbullah in 2006, because of fear that communal tensions at the football stadiums could spread to society at large.33

In Turkey, following the instrumental role of the Carsi-supporters of the Besiktas club in Istanbul during the protests in the Gezi-park in 2013-14, the authorities have banned political slogans and banners inside the stadiums. The Carsi supporter group, that has had a long history of communicating political messages from within the football stadiums, took on a huge role in the Gezi-park demonstrations, bringing an organized group of several thousands Carsi-members to the demonstrations.34

Similarly in Iran, some of the most expressive anti-regime protests have originated from football supporters. In 2001, opposition groups called on Iranians to protest during the football qualification games of the national team to the world championship, as the days to call the Iranians to the streets. And in fact, masses turned out to oppose the economy and puritanical

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social laws of the regime, part street partying, part rioting, leading to more than 1000 arrests of young demonstrators.³⁵

The role of football as a barometer of political trends is thus widespread throughout the Middle East region. In addition to the mentioned countries there are especially two countries that need to be mentioned. In Egypt and Saudi Arabia football has come to play a significant political role not only as barometers of political trends, but also of supporters affecting political developments.

**Egypt**

In Egypt, football as an arena for political struggle and resistance goes back more than 100 years. When the most successful club in Egypt, Al-Ahli, was founded in 1907, it was as a cover for activists fighting British colonial rule. Al-Ahli members have remained at the center of political struggles in Egypt ever since.

Thus, it was organized Al-Ahli supporters who formed the front line of demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo during the Egyptian revolution. The “ultras” of Al-Ahli knew how to fight the police from the football stadiums. They knew how to hit and run, escape and regroup, and how to endure mistreatment and exposure to tear gas. The revolution could have failed had it not been for the efforts of the Al-Ahli “ultras” to prevent the Tahrir Square from being cleared in January 2011.³⁶

Their part in the revolution was also the background for the massacre in Port Said in February 2012, where seventy-nine people, mainly Al-Ahli supporters, were killed. Reportedly, the Al-Ahli supporters were attacked and killed by Mubarak supporters. The massacre was “a plot against democratic transition, a revenge,” according to the Muslim Brotherhood leader Essam El-Eriam.³⁷ Since the Port Said massacre, football supporters have been banned from entering the stadiums in Egypt.

That the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leader Al-Eriam referred to the Port Said massacre as “revenge” does not imply that Al-Ahli supporters are affiliated with the MB. The supporters do not share a uniform ideological platform, and also demonstrated against the MB during the MB’s short time in power. If anything, the supporters share a kind of anti-authoritarian, negative class-consciousness, defining themselves through their opponents.

They nevertheless represent significant fan power. Their Facebook page is said to have 1.1 million followers. In November 2014, thousands of Al-Ahli supporters forced themselves into a stadium to watch Al-Ahli play, using a truck to break down one of the closed gates. Security

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³⁵ Iranian protests. Football hooligans they aren’t. *The Economist* 1. 11.2001
http://www.economist.com/node/843132

http://www.culanth.org/?q=node/489

officials had to give the supporters permission to see the match, to avoid a bloody confrontation.\(^{38}\)

Reportedly, along with other supporter groups, Al-Ahli supporters have recently been active in organizing demonstrations at universities.\(^{39}\) Football thus remains an essential instrument of youth political engagement and anti-government organization in Egypt.

**Saudi Arabia**

In Saudi Arabia, more youth reportedly go to football matches than to mosques.\(^{40}\) When the Riyadh team Al-Hilal played the final in the Asian football cup in November 2014, 70,000 people attended. The huge popularity of the sport has put pressure on national sport authorities. When Saudi Arabia failed to qualify for the World Cup in 2012, the head of the Saudi Arabian Football Federation, Prince Nawaf bin Faisal, was forced to step down. For the first time a member of the royal family had to step down and be replaced by a commoner, through democratic elections within the football federation. In 2013, Prince Faisal bin Turki – a nephew of King Abdullah – had to escape from a crowd of angry football fans who had organized a campaign to have him leave his position in their club in Riyadh. “Soccer clubs rather than mosques are likely to be the center of the revolution,” said an expert on Saudi politics from the Gulf Institute in Washington.\(^{41}\)

Moreover, Saudi women were in 2013 for the first time given access to football matches, partly as a result of domestic pressure. A football league for women is organized underground. For away matches, the women go without their male protectors, sometimes secretly. One football player told the master’s student Charlotte Lyse that she used to tell her family that she was going studying, and that she secretly threw her football equipment out the window to go and play. “I am an activist,” another player said, admitting that she had female emancipation as her hidden agenda when playing football.\(^{42}\)

Football in Saudi Arabia reveals how there is a deep incongruence between the culture and normative preferences of youth and the old men controlling the state. During the World Cup in 2014, religious authorities prevented the youth from watching football matches during praying time, physically blocking the passage to Internet cafes. When football has become the most democratic space in the Saudi society, where popular pressure has led to elections of new leaders, this illuminates deeper tensions in the Saudi system. At the football arena, youth opposition to the elders and cultural opposition to religious conservatism have merged. The challenge of the Saudi authorities is to prevent this opposition expanding beyond the sphere of football.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.


\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Lysa, Charlotte. «Yalla, banat! En rapport om kvinner og fotball i Saudi Arabia.» Internasjonal Prosjektsemester rapport, høst 2014, UiO.
Conclusion

Jordan, along with other monarchies in the Arab world, survived the first storm of the Arab Spring. A democracy-reversing wave has ostensibly followed the first democratization wave. To explain this the fear of the population of fitna, chaos and civil war, must be taken into account. So must the efforts of regime officials of warning against such fitna – not to say producing some of the violence that they were warning against. In Jordan, football disturbances may partly be interpreted within such a framework. But while Jordanian football management could be seen as successful understood from one perspective, football disturbances represent an ominous symptom from another. The regular disturbances indicate that deep frustrations are boiling underneath the surface. The most valuable asset of states benefitting from prolonged political stability is trust in the system. Political trust is thoroughly lacking in Jordan where a widespread perception is that one population group dominates the state system against the other. This makes the political foundation of the state weak. The factors underlying the Arab uprisings – autocracy, youth unemployment, patriarchy – are omnipresent in Jordan as in the Arab world at large. Youth who believe that finding a relevant job in the future will be as unlikely as having political reforms in their country, may prove hard to control, outside the football stadiums as well as inside.

The New Middle East: Emerging Political and Ideological Trends (NewME)

A research project based at the University of Oslo, comprising researchers from PRIO and the UiO. There are several researchers on the project, each working on their own sub-projects within a common framework. The project started in 2011 and will be completed by the summer of 2016. The project is founded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.