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978-0-521-87048-1 - Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave

Tamir Sorek

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## Arab Soccer in a Jewish State

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Over the last two decades, soccer has become a major institution within the popular culture of the Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel, who have attained disproportionate success in this field. Given their marginalization from many areas of Israeli society, as well as the ongoing Israeli–Palestinian conflict, such a prominent Arab presence highlights the tension between their Israeli citizenship and their belonging to the Palestinian people. Bringing together sociological, anthropological and historical approaches, Tamir Sorek examines how soccer can potentially be utilized by ethnic and national minorities as a field of social protest, a stage for demonstrating distinctive identity, or as a channel for social and political integration. Relying on a rich combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, he argues that equality in the soccer sphere legitimizes contemporary inequality between Jews and Arabs in Israel and pursues wider arguments about the role of sport in ethno-national conflicts.

TAMIR SOREK is an Assistant Professor of Sociology and Israel Studies at the University of Florida.

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In memory of my beloved brother Alon (1985–2006)

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## *Preface and acknowledgments*

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As a child in a Kibbutz in the western Galilee, and a mediocre player on our very mediocre soccer team, I sometimes participated in regional soccer competitions against teams which represented Arab towns and villages. These competitions were among the rare opportunities for us, the Jewish youth from the Kibbutz, to meet Arab youth, who despite their numerical predominance in the Galilee, were almost invisible for us. My memories from these encounters include sentiments of alert and worry; I always felt that for our Arab rivals, it was much more than a game, as if they were trying by any means to prove something to us, or to themselves.

Holding a very superficial and selective knowledge about the social history of the landscape of my childhood, as well as about the political dynamics of Arab–Jewish relations in Israel, I did not yet have the tools to decipher the political complexity of these encounters. Years later, as a graduate student at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the Hebrew University, equipped with much more historical and political knowledge, as well as theoretical perspectives and methodological tools, I had the opportunity to investigate in a scholarly way Arab–Jewish soccer encounters and study the tension I felt as a teenager. Between 1998 and 2001, I conducted a doctoral study on Arab soccer in Israel, which constitutes the core of this book. This long journey, which began as an attempt to study “the other,” has taught me as well much about “my” side in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and even about the ways that the boundaries between “them” and “us” have been constructed.

I began the study during a relatively optimistic period in Jewish–Arab and Israeli–Palestinian relations. Since then, we experienced the crisis of October 2000 when Arab demonstrators were killed by Israeli police, and four years of the second Intifada during which more than 3,000

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Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis lost their lives. It is in this context in particular that many good people consider soccer to be an island of sanity and tolerance in a stormy sea of enmity. This book is not intended to pull the rug out from under this conviction, but it does shed light on the less popularly known and less discussed aspects of soccer in Israel, as well as on the complex (and not always innocent) role which soccer plays in the relations between the Jewish majority and the Arab–Palestinian minority.

Parts of this book have been previously published as articles in journals and edited volumes. Some of the main arguments appeared first in my article “Arab Football in Israel as an Integrative Enclave,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 26 (3), 2003, as well as in “Arab Soccer in a Jewish State,” in *Jews, Sports and the Rites of Citizenship*, edited by Jack Kugelmass University of Illinois Press, 2006. Chapters 2 and 3 are an extension and elaboration of my article “Palestinian Nationalism has Left the Field – A Shortened History of Arab Soccer in Israel,” which appeared in *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 35 (3) 2003. An earlier version of chapter 7 appeared as an article, “The Islamic Soccer League in Israel: Setting Moral Boundaries by Taming the Wild,” *Identities – Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 9 (4), 2002. Chapter 8 is based on my article, “Between Football and Martyrdom – the Bi-Focal Localism of a Palestinian Town in Israel,” *British Journal of Sociology*, 56 (4) 2005.

Throughout the years of working on this book I enjoyed the support of a number of institutions that financed the study, as well as many colleagues and friends who helped with good will and talent. First, thanks to my two thesis advisers who believed in the project from its inception: Baruch Kimmerling, whose sociological *Weltanschauung* served as my main source of inspiration, believed and supported, encouraged and challenged; and Danny Rabinowitz, whose original anthropological viewpoint is obvious throughout this book. I wish also to express my gratitude to the Israel Foundation Trustees and to the Shain Center for Research in the Social Sciences at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for research grants which facilitated gathering of data, and to the Eshkol Institute for a sustenance grant. A special and warm thanks to the Meyerhoff Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Maryland, where, during my stay as a research fellow in 2000–2002, I wrote much of the original dissertation. The former center director, Marsha Rozenblit, provided generous support with much good will. The Department of Near Eastern Studies at Cornell University, where I spent three years from 2003 to 2006, was a warm academic home. Special thanks to the then Department Chair, Ross Brann, who secured funding for translation which enabled me to publish this book in a relatively short time.

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Thanks also to the hundreds of interviewees – soccer fans, journalists, functionaries – most of whom I did not know personally, but without whose cheerful compliance I could not have presented you with this book. In order to preserve the anonymity of the fans, their names appearing in the book are fictitious. Functionaries interviewed by virtue of their positions, however, appear with their original names.

Many of my colleagues and friends gave of their time and talents to read the manuscript at various stages of its development and enlightened me with their observations. Ramzi Suleiman, Moshe Zimmerman, and Kobi Metzger, read an earlier version of the manuscript in Hebrew and made significant contributions with their valuable comments. Allan Bairner and Paul Silverstein reviewed the English version and their insights were very helpful in upgrading and polishing the final product. I wish also to thank Nabih Bashir, Eyal Ben-Ari, Amir Ben-Porat, Ruti Kadish-Brener, Laleh Khalili, Etan Kohlberg, Daniel Maman, Shira Robinson, Sezet Rohana, Zeev Rosenhek, Guy Stecklov, Michael Shalev, Ishay Shneydor, Nurit Stadler, Shawkat Toorawa, and Ibtisam Tarabiya, who read and commented on parts of the manuscript.

Finally, I am grateful to my wife Michelle, who has been a wonderful emotional and intellectual partner. I benefitted from her comments, insights, and editorial suggestions, and she deserves special thanks for her support.