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SPORT, RADICALISATION AND COUNTERRADICALISATION



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This paper is based upon the researches conducted by James M. Dorsey, University of Wuerzburg

SPORT, RADICALISATION AND COUNTER RADICALISATION

This paper aims to research and analyze the role of sports in general and soccer in particular in both radicalization and de-radicalization processes with the aim of developing policy tools that can be deployed at the European Union level by various stakeholders, including law enforcement, sports associations and clubs. In doing so, it will build on research such as that of Paul Verweel and M. Douglas¹ to identify threats emanating from and opportunities offered by soccer with the goal of designing and validating an integrated strategy to counter radicalization.

The research paper is rooted in the fact that sports and particularly soccer as an action driven activity often plays an important role in the development of militancy as has been explored among others by James M. Dorsey² and French-American scholar Scott Atran in his book *'Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un)Making of Terrorists'* published in 2011.

The importance of soccer in recruitment and bonding is evident in the fact that many of the Palestinian suicide bombers in the 1990s bonded in an amateur soccer club in Hebron. The 2004 Madrid bombers played soccer together. Militant fans of a Belgrade club owned by paramilitary leader Arkan provided a spark for the wars in former Yugoslavia. Egyptian soccer fans played a key role in the 2011 overthrow of Hosni Mubarak.

By the same token, however, immigrant clubs of which made it to the top league in countries like Sweden have served as catalysts for integration.

Soccer in other words is at the core of narratives that shape foreign, immigration and absorption policies as well as an inter-cultural dialogue and understanding such as nationalism, islamophobia, youth gangs, racism, anarchism, right-wing extremism and militant Islam. It can be either a push or pull factor depending on the broader social and political environment as well as a situation-bound constellation of factors. It is frequently a tool but seldom a driver in relation to key issues such as political and non-political violence, racism and radicalization or de-radicalization.

Sports in general and soccer has historically been closely linked to racial and extreme nationalist attitudes and often to violent radicalization.

As early as 1314, King Edward II banned football because he feared the disorder surrounding matches could lead to social unrest, and even treason. England, five centuries later in 1985, witnessed one of its worst football riots when hooligans of Birmingham City and Leeds United clashed. Violence erupted that same year during the European cup final between Liverpool and Juventus in which 39 supporters died. Radical fan groups have at times constituted a way station for paramilitary recruitment as the examples of Arkan's Tigers in Serbia demonstrate who emerged from the nationalist support group of Red Star Belgrade. They are credited with

¹ Paul Verweel, *Respect in en Door Sport*, Uitgeverij SWP, Amsterdam, 2007, M.Douglas, *Essays with Sociology of Perception*, Routledge, London, 1982

² James M. Dorsey, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com>

sparking during a match against Dynamo Zagreb the first of the wars in former Yugoslavia.

SOCCER AND POLITICS IN TURKEY

Financially stressed Turkish soccer clubs are becoming pawns in the political struggle between Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and militant soccer fans who rank prominently among his detractors as soccer pitches and university campuses emerge as major battlefields between the government and its detractors. Critics of Mr. Erdogan charge that the prime minister is seeking to enlist clubs in much the same carrot-and-stick way that he tamed the media by exploiting financial vulnerabilities. Soccer unlike the media has militant fans determined to thwart Mr. Erdogan's attempts to use troubled clubs to whip them into line. Fans have defied a recent government ban on the chanting of political slogans during matches, rejected attempts by clubs on instructions of the government to sign pledges to abide by the ban, and ridiculed a government public relations campaign that portrays peaceful protest as a precursor for suicide bombings. Mr. Erdogan's ability to whip clubs into line and employ them in his confrontation with soccer fans has been enhanced by the debt burden under which Turkish teams are laboring. [Bloomberg News](#) quoted the Istanbul stock exchange as saying that short-term borrowings of storied Istanbul club Besiktas JK, its Istanbul rival and Turkish champion Galatasaray SC and Black Sea club Trabzonspor FC created "uncertainty over the sustainability" of their finances. The bourse said that shareholders' equity for each was negative. Galatasaray is staring at \$57 million of debt due in the next year as the result of the expensive acquisition of players like Didier Drogba and hiring of Coach Roberto Mancini. Even so Galatasaray with a debt-to-cash ratio of 13:1 compares favorably to Trabzonspor's ratio of 40:1 and Besiktas' 24:1, according to data compiled by Bloomberg. "If Turkish soccer isn't reformed, institutionalized and if all goes as it has so far, Turkish soccer is doomed to hit a wall," said soccer economist and journalist Tugrul Aksar. A just published [Amnesty International report](#) concluded that the brutal suppression of the Gezi Park protests and with it the subsequent government campaign against militant soccer fans "significantly undermined the claims of the ruling Justice and Development Party to be delivering responsible, rights-respecting government and exposed a striking intolerance of opposing voices. Among those facing allegedly unfair or inflated charges are 20 members of Carsi, the popular support group of Besiktas who stand accused of being members of an illegal organization. Carsi's reply in defiance of the ban on political slogans has been to chant "everywhere is Taksim, everywhere is resistance" during matches echoing a popular June protest tune.

Police and security force handling of support groups as well as of anti-government protests in which soccer support groups are prominent plays a key role in the shaping of attitudes and potential radicalization. Police brutality against environmental protesters in June 2013 in Istanbul persuaded Turkey's foremost support group, Carsi that is linked with Besiktas JK to unite the city's foremost rival football groups in protecting the environmentalists against the police.



In doing so, the soccer fan groups and the environmentalists tapped into widespread discontent with the government, sparking nation-wide protests. For their part, Egyptian officials are discussing how to deal with the ultras, militant soccer fans who played a key role in the toppling in 2011 of President Hosni Mubarak as well as in post-Mubarak protests against the military.

Militant soccer fans share communalities in philosophy, narratives, banners and symbols that are found the EU in both hooliganism and violent radicalization despite vast differences in the political and social environment in which they operate. They view themselves as the only true supporters of their clubs; players are mercenaries who sell their skills and services to the highest bidders while managers depending on circumstance are in it for business and glory or political advantage. Police and security forces are frequently the frontline enemy. Many of these groups adopt the slogan, “*All Cops are Bastards*”. Violent radicalism can run the political gamut, including nationalism and racist right-wing extremism as in for example Italy, Germany and Eastern Europe that is more often than not linked to economic deterioration, immigration and foreign policy. This is often expressed in racial slurs against players and their families. **The modus operandi of these groups frequently resembles that of street and fan gangs that feed into violent radicalization in the EU.**

It is not however necessarily all bad news. Sports in general and soccer in particular can also contribute to social cohesion, integration and cultural openness.



Soccer impacts on democratisation processes in North Africa, political transitions in the Western Balkans, media freedom in Turkey and social conditions in the Gulf region, as well documented by the Qatari case.

Soccer offers a prism on how Europe is being shaped by significant migration flows and serves as a barometer of successes and failures in integration policy

QATAR: SOCCER AND WORKERS' RIGHTS

There is one story that potentially could affect the very future, shape and security of the wealthy Gulf state: mounting criticism of living and working conditions of up to a million unskilled and semi-skilled workers expected to build infrastructure for the tournament. Failure to address labor conditions in Qatar, involving both material issues such as a mounting number of work-related deaths, confiscation of passports and lack of access to basic amenities including drinking water as well as the onerous kafala or sponsorship system that makes workers beholden to their employers would open FIFA to allegations that it cares only about the welfare of several hundred players at the expense of hundreds of thousands creating the infrastructure they need. British newspaper The Guardian reported this week that 70 Nepalese laborers had died in work-related incidents in the last 18 months. Other media reports said a further 159 Indian workers had also died since the beginning of this year. Qatari labor and social affairs minister Abdullah Saleh Al Khulaifi, in a rare instance of self-criticism, implicitly acknowledged that his government had been lax in implementing laws and regulations that human rights activists privately recognize afford workers significant protections. They include a ban on confiscation of workers' passports after completion of immigration procedures, strict regulation of on-time payment of wages and working hours in periods of extreme heat, and guaranteed access to drinking water and proper healthcare. Mr. Khulaifi said his ministry would increase the number of inspectors checking that companies are compliant with labor laws regarding healthcare, safety, living conditions and salaries; hire more translators to communicate with foreign workers; and establish branch offices in areas where foreign workers live.

It also spotlights football's ability to encourage bonding and the development of separate, often multilayered, identities that help groups find common ground while at the same time differentiating themselves from one another.

DALKURD FOOTBAAL TEAM: A BEST PRACTICE

The Kurdish football club Dalkurd FF, started in 2004 with the support of top Swedish football club IK Brage as a project to create jobs for Kurdish youth. Dalkurd's meteoric rise has put it on the international football map and turned it into a model of how a Middle Eastern immigrant community can address its social and economic problems and project its identity. Dalkurd, one of three Swedish clubs that have fielded Europe's most successful immigrant teams. The three Swedish teams formed by Kurds or Assyrians/Syriacs – two groups that faced off with each other in the early 20th century in rugged eastern Turkey – thrive in a country that is the most welcoming in Europe to non-EU immigrants. As a result, Sweden hosts more than 25 Assyrian/Syriac clubs alone as well as a score of less-prominent Kurdish ones. Elvan Cicen, Dalkurd's co-founder and sports director, says "We are both Kurdish and Swedish. Football is our tool to integrate people. We took kids off the streets and away from the gangs. Everybody blamed the kids. But the real problem was the parents, who often were analphabets. The kids lived in different worlds in school and at home. The parents didn't see what was happening and the kids weren't integrated. We started involving the parents," Cicen says. Dalkurd players have become role models in local high schools. They have sparked a cultural revolution, inspiring girls to form their own team with the support of Dalkurd managers who seek to overcome the objections put forward by conservative parents. If Dalkurd advances into the UEFA Europa League, the club would also achieve another goal: it would symbolise Kurdish integration into Sweden.

It is this potential that has persuaded radical Islamists such as the Somalia's Shabab to ban watching football games.

That was driven home by the fact that the Somali Football Federation played a key role in weaning child soldiers away from the jihadists who had forcibly conscripted them from makeshift soccer fields where they were playing.

Across a swath of land stretching from the Atlantic coast of North Africa into Central Asia, soccer and stadiums have been and are battlefields; battlefields between autocrats and fans for political rights and public space as well as battlefields for national, ethnic, religious, sectarian, gender, human and labor rights.

SOCCER AND GENDER ISSUES

Granting women sporting rights in the kingdom that in most parts of the world would be taken for granted takes on added significance with the Saudi Football Federation's recent suggestion that the kingdom will compete against the



United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Thailand and Iran for the right to host the 2019 Asia Cup; hints that Saudi Arabia may field a serious candidate for next year's election of a new head of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) and the acquisition by Saudi Prince Abdullah bin Mosaad of a 50 percent stake in third tier English club Sheffield United. A country that is developing its first national sports plan for men only; lacks physical education for girls

in public schools; forces women's soccer clubs to operate in a legal and social nether land; bans women from driving, travelling without authorization from a male relative and working in a host of professions; and when it was forced last year by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) to field women athletes chose two minor expatriates, Saudi Arabia is particularly vulnerable to criticism. Saudi Football Federation (SFF) president Ahmed Eid Alharbi, a storied former goalkeeper who became the kingdom's first elected sports official after his predecessor, a member of the ruling family, was forced under fan pressure to step down, has hinted at the economic impact of allowing women to attend soccer matches would have. He said earlier this year that the creation of facilities for women would increase capacity at stadiums by 15 percent. Alharbi said the Prince Abdullah Al-Faisal Stadium in Jeddah would be the first to accommodate up to 32,000 women followed by the King Abdullah City stadium in the capital in 2014. Saudi Arabia, which enforces strict gender segregation, first announced in 2012 plans to upgrade the Jeddah stadium to enable women to enter.

Soccer's impact at a European level on issues such as immigration and racism is highlighted by the fact that a third of all goals in major European competitions in recent years were scored by either foreign-born players or those from immigrant families. Of the 2600 professional players in the 5 top EU Leagues, 800 are expatriates born and recruited in an often Muslim country, and another 500 are immigrants or their descendants. These footballers account for almost half of the players in the continent's national teams.

They often play an important role in the promotion of liberalism in their country of origin or that of their ancestors.



Take German-Tunisian football player, Sami Khedira, who sparked the first crisis in post-revolt Tunisia with pictures reprinted from the GQ Magazine showing him dressed in a tuxedo covering with his hands the breasts of his otherwise naked girlfriend, German model Lena Gerke.

Soccer is also a powerful tool in grassroots diplomacy. Examples abound, including the VIVA World Cup for nations or population groups that are not recognized by world soccer body FIFA; top level immigrant teams like Sweden's Dalkurd (Kurdish) and Assyriska and Syrianska (both Assyrian) as tens of lower level Kurdish and Assyrian clubs; or Nuri Sahin, the German-born football player of the Bundesliga,

who refused to play for the German national team, opting instead for the Turkish team in an expression of identity.

Denmark emerged as an unlikely catalyst for acceptance of women who choose to wear a headdress on the football pitch. In 2008 the Danish Football Association backed the 15-years old star striker Zainab Khatib in her demand for the right to play with head covered That fact ultimately contributed to a decision by the International Football Association Board 2012 to allow religiously observant women could wear a headdress that meets their cultural requirements, as well as standards of safety and security, in the same way the , arguing that it was the equivalent of Brazilian midfielder Ronaldino Gauchó's headband. Khatib's struggle was important in a world in which women have to struggle for the right to play soccer and in countries like Iran or Saudi Arabia for the right to enter a stadium as a spectator.

SPORT, SECURITY, POLITICS AND A NEW GOVERNANCE TO PREVENT INSURGENCIES



Global sports governance is not immune to the wave of protests witness Brazil's demonstrations against the 2014 World Cup, this year's protests during Bahrain's F1 and the key role that militant soccer fans played in the overthrow in 2011 of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak

as well protests over the politics underlying the country's soccer match fixing scandal.

If anything, the problems of global sports governance mirror issues underlying the more general wave of protests and its relation with political powers.

Grievances are common to political radicals. What has sparked protest ranges from public transportation costs and the fate of iconic trees to lack of economic opportunity and the choking grip of autocrats. Yet, underlying the wave of protests are common factors that concern not only political leaders and economic elites but also global sports managers. Among them:

- A lack of confidence in existing institutions, arising from a perception of political, economic and social (sports) leadership that fails to listen and are not held to account for wrong decisions, misguided policies and improper or mis-management;
- failure to root out corruption at all levels of political, economic and social leadership, and a perception that economic progress has failed to ensure that

infrastructure as well as health and education facilities do not trail the lifting of huge numbers out of poverty; and a demand for social justice, dignity and inclusiveness.

“FIFA rules nations”

The fact that virtually all protests and popular revolts are urban middle class in nature and claim a stake in shaping their urban environment and cultural identity has far-reaching consequences for sports managers and regional and global sports associations and the staging of mega events. Similarities between radical grievances and sport protests are relevant. The references of various Brazilian protesters to the 2014 World Cup should constitute a wake-up call, such as:

- “The World Cup perpetuates our urban crisis. We have become disenfranchised consumers”.
- “We live in cities that operate on profit in which residents are not consulted. People are fed up with not having a say.”
- “The real president of our country is FIFA. FIFA comes to our country, sets up a state within a state, and leaves.”

Lack of confidence in institutions is reinforced by the frequent initial knee-jerk deployment of police and security forces to control if not quell protest in which sports fans and particularly soccer fans are often in the forefront and they easily cross the bridge between sport and politics. .



The use of indiscriminate police force swells protests that frequently are initially focused on a specific issue. It lifts the lid on far broader, deeply felt, pent-up anger and frustration and as demonstrated in the case of Brazil and Turkey makes it difficult to put the lid back on. Sports associations like FIFA perceived as an elitist, closed old boy network, that fails to tackle issues of corruption and mismanagement, enforce its governance rules and maintain independence from political authority, invariably become institutions whose credibility is questioned.

International Events as Catalyzers of Security Threats

In addition, the emergence of mega events like the World Cup and the Olympic Games as platforms for campaigns for all kinds of rights – human, labour, gender, national, ethnic and religious – increasingly empowers activists, puts regional and

international sports associations in the front line and puts the associations as well as nations at risk of reputational damage. This year's Formula One public relations disaster in Bahrain, trade union pressure on Qatar, controversy over Israel's hosting of the FIFA Under-21 finals, last year's successful International Olympic Committee (IOC) campaign that forced three reluctant Muslim nations for the first time to field women athletes at a global sporting event and the recent election of a Bahraini soccer executive as president of the troubled Asian Football Confederation prove the point.

The responses of Qatar, Bahrain, Israel and Saudi Arabia have failed to gain them the upper hand in popular perception and coverage in the media; both of which are dominated by activists highlighting their failure to adhere to international standards of human, labour and/or gender rights. Worse, hosting mega events and nominating officials for regional and international office, has reinforced the negative perceptions they were trying to dispel. Their failure has strengthened calls for such rights to become key criteria in the awarding of future mega-events. It has also rendered the separation of sports and politics a fiction and focused attention on the need to develop systems that acknowledge the relationship but eliminate conflict of interest, to ensure that it is not abused for partisan political interests on an individual, national, regional and international scale.

Sports governance: A sound policy prescription

If reputational damage and failure to achieve a key goal is a host nation's primary risk, activists may see such failure as a moral victory. Similarly, they are likely to claim any progress such as an improvement of workers' material labour and living condition as a success even if they are unable to meet their ultimate goal. The message for host countries and sports associations is: mega events constitute a platform for showcasing both a country's progress as well as its warts. The question potential hosts have to ask themselves is what price are they willing to pay in terms of reputational risk if they are not willing or able to address their vulnerabilities. That question is all the more acute as international sports bodies like FIFA are under pressure to make human, labour and women's rights part of the criteria for awarding events. In doing so, they are likely to raise the barrier for a country's chance of gaining the opportunity to host a major event.

Proactive regional and international sports associations would do well to have their ear close to the ground to understand a swelling global trend that defines legitimacy, social justice and dignity as greater inclusivity, transparency and accountability. Understanding this trend and its consequences as it spills into the streets of the world's capitals and major urban centers involves a paradigm shift in sports management, including:

- A recognition that sports and politics are inextricably intertwined. Denial of this fact of life undermines credibility and flies in the face of reality. That reality is evident at every twist of the road from the direct involvement of rulers, politicians and governments in the boards and executive committees

of regional and international sports associations to the use of mega events by nations and governments to the role that global governing bodies play in the legitimization of rulers. That recognition should lead to the creation of a charter and/or code of conduct that governs the relationship between sports and politics;

- A revisiting of the criteria for the awarding of mega events. This would involve inclusion of international human, labour and gender standards in the awarding criteria as well as greater public engagement in the national and urban decision making process, enhanced transparency of the infrastructural requirements a host has to meet and the terms of the agreement between the sports association and the host. Sports associations will have to balance the infrastructural requirements of a tournament with the long-term needs, cultural identity and popular aspirations of host cities and ensure that its demands are in line and balanced with overall urban and municipal policies rather than at the expense of. They will have to also revisit their positioning as supra-national entities that are laws unto themselves.
- A restructuring of regional and international sports associations that is governed by regulation of the relationship between sports and politics, takes grassroots into considerations and ensures that grassroots voices are heard, and enshrines independent oversight, monitoring and auditing that gives credibility to combatting and preventing abuse of power, mismanagement and corruption.

This is a tall order that entails not only structural adjustment but also a shift in the mental paradigm and a cultural transition. It is not an agenda that can be achieved with a stroke of the pen and will likely take significant time. It is likely to be a process that at times will be bumpy. Bumps will include sports-related protests like those in Brazil and often involve organized sports fans. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff ensured that her government was in front of the curve by recognising the legitimacy of non-violent protests, describing them as an enhancement of her country's democracy and responding to protesters' complaints. Her proactive approach like that of Moroccan King Mohammed VI to the Arab Spring demonstrations in his country offers sports associations and others a model. Others like Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and various deposed Arab leaders provide cautionary tales.

The late economist Albert Hirschman argued that protest can lead to "a new, more cohesive democratic order being produced." Recognition of the fact that non-violent protest is a pillar of a democratic, open and pluralistic society places the risk of failing to have one's ear to the ground into perspective. Protest is no longer simply a disruptive element that despoils a major event. Instead, events by becoming platforms in effect contribute to the development of healthy societies. They are nevertheless

also events that frequently could have been avoided and made explosions of pent-up anger and frustration less likely if public sentiment had been taken into account earlier.

The decade between 9/11 and the first popular Arab revolts in 2011 illustrates both the clarifying effect that protest has, even in its most violent form, and the risk in failing to recognize and acknowledge simmering discontent. That illustration contains lessons not only for governments but also for managers at all levels, including those of regional and national sports associations.

Proactive anticipation rather than defensive reaction

In the immediate aftermath of the Al Qaeda attacks on New York and Washington in September 2001, government officials from then US President George W. Bush down, think tanks pundits and the media blamed the attacks on widespread discontent with repressive rule in the Middle East. That assumption was reinforced by recognition that a policy that gave priority to stability by supporting autocratic regimes rather than to ideals of dignity, justice and economic opportunity had created the circumstances that made the 9/11 attacks possible.

In response, much attention was focused in the wake of 9/11 on the Arab street, the code word for public opinion in the Middle East and North Africa. The expectation was that the Arab street would express its aspirations. Attention to the street diminished when it did not live up to the expectations of officials, analysts and journalists who began to deride those who stressed the need to be more attentive to Arab public opinion. Like the autocratic regimes against whom they revolted, Western officials, analysts and journalists wrote off a whole generation and class.

In reality however, while the change in mood in Western capitals was a reaction to the fact that the Arab street did not conform to the West's time frame, nothing on the ground had changed. Pent-up anger and frustration had not dissipated. On the contrary, it continued to fester and boil at the surface. It was noticeable to anyone who put his ear to the ground. The only thing that was not predictable was what would cause that anger to boil over and when that might happen.

It should have been clear from the outset that once Tunisian fruit vendor Mohamed Bouazizi's suicide on the doorstep of the governor's office went viral, his cry was not simply one for justice, freedom and economic opportunity but, first and foremost, an act of desperation in the face of humiliation, a cry for dignity that resonated with the masses across the region as well as around the globe. From Sao Paulo to Istanbul and from New York to Cairo the outcry was against the indignity of crony capitalism and neo-liberalism which ensured that rules are rigged in favour of elites, to the disadvantage of the middle classes. For Bouazizi and the millions in the Middle East and North Africa whom he inspired, it was the daily humiliation and police brutality meted out by repressive autocratic officials and their cronies that dominated their ordinary lives

Theirs is a massive denunciation of years of political and institutional decay, the voices of long-standing criticism of the status quo as well as the generational desire for political change and safeguards of democratic freedoms rather than the expression of new ideas. At times, the denunciation is preceded by the emergence of political groupings that are as much characterized by discontent with the status quo as they are by ideology. In Egypt it was the Kefaya (Enough) movement that pioneered the use of social media, mastered the art of symbolic demonstrations and carved out space in the media; in the United States it was the Tea Party, a populist and libertarian movement that opposed the US Troubled Asset Relief Program; in India the uproar towards corrupt telecommunications licence auctions; and in Europe the electoral turn towards far right-wing and green political parties.

In virtually all cases – Occupy Wall Street, the anti-Putin demonstrations in Russia and the series of revolts sweeping the Middle East and North Africa -- the instigators were more often than not young, middle class and educated with no prior political affiliations driven by a globally shared perception that their political and economic systems were broken. Unlike the 1989 demise of communism their protests are sparked by a sense of disintegration across society not just at the system's nerve center. Perhaps the most apt comparison for 2011 as a Year of Protest is the 1848 revolt in Paris that abolished the monarchy and established the French republic. Like in 1848 when a small act of protest mushroomed into a mass movement fuelled by technological advance of the time -- telegraphy, railroads and printing presses – current protests are enabled by the Internet, social media and technology that circumvents censorship and enables free communications.

In the Arab world, it was the cannon fodder – the Mohamed Bouazizis or shabab (youth) of the Middle East and North Africa – that lost the most blood in revolts and displayed the most bravery because they had the least to lose. While religion may be a major influence in their lives, electoral politics despite the emergence of Islamist forces, has not provided the channel for the pursuit of their political ambitions. That is largely because they, like many protesters across the globe, are driven by what they don't want rather than any concept of what they want as is evident in Egypt and Turkey.

By contract sport and soccer in particular may be exploited by national powers to reach strategic interests, as in the case of the ongoing confrontation between Iraq and Saudi Arabia on the Ka'as al-Khaligi, the Gulf Cup.

THE IRAQI-SAUDI WAR FOR THE GULF CUP

Politics have further been embedded in the tournament's Arabic name Kaas El Khaleej El Arabi or Arabian Gulf Cup to counter Iran's identification of the region as the Persian Gulf. In a spat in July, the Iranian football federation, whose own top league, the Persian Gulf League, adheres to the Islamic republic's position in the war of semantics, responded sharply to the UAE renaming its premier league as the Arabian



Gulf League. The Iranians blocked the transfer of Iranian players to UAE clubs and broke the contracts of those who had already moved. World soccer body FIFA vice president and AFC executive committee member Prince Ali Bin Al-Hussein of Jordan referred to the war of words by stressing "that it is crucial for FIFA, which comprises more than 200 richly diverse members, to be mindful and respectful of cultural sensitivities. Respect of other cultures

is indeed one of the core values of our beautiful game," Prince Ali said. His remarks came after FIFA referred to the Gulf on its website as the Persian Gulf in what Prince Ali called a "misunderstanding." The prince went a step further by saying "that it is about time FIFA embrace the Arabic language as an official language, spoken by more than 300 million people in twenty-two Arab countries; all of which are members of the football governing body." To be sure, soccer associations in the Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) that groups the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman alongside the kingdom stand on solid ground in arguing that they moved the Gulf Cup scheduled for late next year or early 2015 in which Iraq and Yemen also compete from the southern Iraqi city of Basra to Jeddah for security reasons. Iraq has in recent months been rocked by a series of suicide attacks and bombings reminiscent of the sectarian violence several years ago. Similarly, Iraq has a history of political interference in the affairs of the Iraqi Football Association (IFA). In addition to security concerns, the GCC based its decision on assertions that Iraq had failed to complete the necessary infrastructure for the Cup. In announcing its boycott of the Cup, which is widely popular in the Gulf and fiercely contested, Iraq said it had poured a huge sum of money into preparing for the tournament. It pointed out that Gulf states had agreed in 2007 to hold it in Basra, at a time when the security situation was worse than it is now. "It has become manifestly clear that the reason for moving the (tournament) from Basra to Jeddah is political and taken under intense pressure from Saudi. Saudi Arabia and others are conspiring behind closed doors against Iraq and the sports (of Iraq)," the Iraqi youth and sport ministry said. In his weekly television address, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri A-Maliki charged that the deprivation of Iraq of its right to host the Cup was "prejudiced against the rights of the Iraqi people." The AFC's statement was prompted by the fact that it was the Iraqi government rather than the IFA that announced Iraq's boycott of the Cup. The AFC said that it had asked the IFA to explain alleged government involvement in the association's decision to boycott. The request is ironic in a part of the world in which soccer, including AFC President Sheikh Salman Bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa's 's own association, is controlled by ruling elites and serves to reinforce the political grip of regimes and prevent the pitch from becoming a rallying point for dissent. A member of the Bahraini ruling family, Sheikh Salman, has refused to stand up for national team soccer players who were denounced, arrested and tortured for participating in the peaceful anti-government protests.

The AFC said neither it nor FIFA would tolerate government interference. "It's the right of the Iraq Football Association to decide on the interest of their team, fans and other stakeholders. The government should not interfere in the football affairs," the AFC said, adding that it was asking the government "to stay away in the interest of Iraqi football."

The AFC statement followed comments by Prince Ali criticizing FIFA for banning Iraq from hosting matches. FIFA reinstated the ban in July because of the increased violence after lifting it in March. The Gulf Cup is not bound by FIFA decisions given that the world body does not recognize the tournament.

The protests represent an irreversible trend despite the fact that protest and revolution more often than not follow Lenin's principle of one step forward, two steps back. Nonetheless, for governments as well as for sports associations the choice is proactively embracing the kind of changes that address protesters' fundamental

concerns or being taken by surprise and possibly being swept away by a tidal wave that has proven to be irresistible.