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Sports and Politics:

Palestinians, Arab States, and Normalization with Israel

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Since it was founded, the Palestinian Authority has faced a dilemma regarding normalization between Israel and the Arab states. On the one hand, the PA depends on “normal” reciprocal relations with Israel, especially in the security and economic spheres, which involve daily interaction between the two sides. For this reason, since the Oslo Accords the Palestinians have been less conservative on the question of normalization than other Arab countries – even those that have signed peace agreements with Israel. On the other hand, despite the Palestinians’ relative flexibility, they have customarily taken action to restrain any display of normalization between Israel and Arab countries, particularly the Gulf states and the Maghreb countries, in order to retain leverage in negotiations with Israel over a permanent settlement. King Abdullah’s initiative, proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2002 (in its current version – the “Arab Peace Initiative”) established the equation desired by the Palestinians, whereby the cultivation of normal relations between Arab states and Israel is contingent on the implementation of an overall peace settlement.

The political deadlock in recent years has led to the hardening of the Palestinian views on normalization in both the economic and cultural spheres. The influence of the BDS movement may have nurtured the growing Palestinian calls for boycotting Israeli goods and services, and sometimes official benefits have even been granted to businesses that refrained from selling Israeli products. Israeli-Palestinian sports competitions, which were formerly promoted by Israeli peace organizations in the framework of reconciliation initiatives, are far less frequent, labeled as unacceptable normalization. The climax in this context was the Palestinian refusal to hold an exhibition game between Barcelona and a joint Israeli-Palestinian team scheduled for the summer of 2013. Palestinian Football Association chairman Jibril Rajoub declared that normalization in sports was a “crime against humanity,” designed to distract attention from “the crimes of occupation,” and condemned the Palestinians involved. He called on the Israeli peace organizations to

work toward reconciliation in other ways, such as protests against Israeli harassment of Palestinian athletes.

Despite the PA's opposition to normalization, however, one issue that remains a bone of contention with some Arab countries concerns visits by sports delegations to the PA in the framework of international sports events. These events require transit through border crossings under Israeli inspection, interactions with Israeli officials, and physical presence in areas under Israeli sovereignty. The Palestinians asked the Arabs not to include these visits among the prohibitions concerning normalization, but these requests were not always granted. The main Palestinian argument was that the boycott should target Israel itself, and a situation avoided of in effect boycotting the PA: depriving it of symbols of sovereignty, such as the right to host international sports competitions, and banishing the Palestinian athletes from their home fields. For example, at the end of the international marathon held by the Palestinians in November 2013, "Jerusalem Governor" Adnan al-Husayni emphasized that the participation of Arab athletes was designed "to support the prisoner, not to conduct normal relations with the prison guard." Rajoub added that the absence of Arab athletes from the marathon served the "occupation," thereby enabling the occupier to conceal its crimes against the Palestinian people.

The Palestinian-Arab debate over normalization reached a peak in September 2015, when Saudi Arabia submitted a request to transfer its game against the Palestinian team in the preliminary games of the 2018 World Soccer Cup to a neutral field. The Saudi team refused to come to Faisal al-Husseini Stadium in the village of al-Ram just outside Jerusalem. The official reason was force majeure. Actually, the Saudi team refuses to enter the West Bank because it would require traveling over the Allenby Bridge, which in their view would constitute recognition of Israel, with which Saudi Arabia has no official diplomatic relations. From the Palestinian perspective, had the Saudi team come to the field in al-Ram, it would have been a major political achievement, bolstering support for their cause. Others, however, could have regarded it as an achievement for Israel by constituting proof that it was allowing normal life to take place on the West Bank.

The Palestinians have tried several ways of assuaging the anxiety expressed by Saudi Arabia that its national team would have to engage in actions at the border crossing involving normalization, especially having their passports stamped by Israel. In the bureaucratic aspect, the Palestinians proposed formulas that would enable the Saudi team to reach the game "without any contact with the occupation, using permits issued by the PA." In the symbolic aspect, the Palestinians made it clear that not only would the visit by the Saudi national team not be considered an expression of normalization, but it would actually rebound to Saudi Arabia's credit as "strengthening the Palestinian hold on

Palestinian soil, and constituting a slap in the face of the occupation.” Had Saudi Arabia so desired, these Palestinian statements could have been used as an honorable way out of its initial rejection of normalization, while championing the Palestinian cause.

Saudi Arabia, however, insisted on holding the game outside the PA, and rejected the proposed bridging formulas – which led to a gradual sharpening of the official Palestinian tone. At first, the Palestinian demand to host the game in the home stadium in al-Ram was accompanied by an expression of appreciation for Saudi Arabia’s many years of support for the Palestinian struggle. When it became clear that Riyadh had no intention of conceding its demand that the game be transferred, and was exploiting its influence in the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) to tilt the decision in its favor, the Palestinians began to criticize Saudi Arabia, mostly implicitly. FIFA’s initial decision to deprive the PA of the opportunity to host the game was termed “abusive and indecent” – a charge that did not accuse Saudi Arabia directly. The Palestinians praised countries that, in contrast to Saudi Arabia, had agreed to send their national teams to the PA, such as the United Arab Emirates and Malaysia, and regarded this move as a source of pride. In addition, Rajoub did not conceal his frustration that Saudi Arabia had unilaterally asked FIFA to deny the Palestinians the right to host the game, without first consulting with the Palestinian side. For its part, Saudi Arabia never specified what force majeure prevented their being hosted by the Palestinians but did not similarly prevent the United Arab Emirates and Malaysian teams from this hospitality.

The dispute with Saudi Arabia exposed the two faces of the Palestinian position on the issue of normalization with Israel, and beyond that, on the question of the separation between sports and politics. Although the Palestinians demanded in May 2015 that FIFA suspend Israel for political reasons, and despite the fact that the grounds used to justify a visit to the PA by the Saudi team were also political, this did not prevent them from simultaneously calling on Saudi Arabia to refrain from mixing sports with politics. This development also exposed the two faces of Riyadh’s position. On the one hand, the kingdom wants to be perceived as supporting the “just” struggle of the Palestinians against Israel: sport is one area in which the Palestinians are attempting to achieve international standing and appear in the role of an independent country. On the other hand, the kingdom is adhering to its refusal to consent to normalization with Israel as long as no comprehensive peace has been achieved, even at the price of harming the Palestinian cause.

At present, the Saudi royal household is faced with a series of challenges at home and abroad, including the war in Yemen, the Hajj disaster, public disputes among the royals, and a less than satisfactory economic situation caused by the drop in oil prices. Accordingly, the royal house likely fears that sending its national team to a location

under Israeli control is a controversial step that will arouse criticism in conservative and anti-Israeli public opinion and in the religious establishment. Furthermore, the reluctance of Saudi Arabia to engage in any kind of normalization, even of the most modest kind, highlights the level of the barriers toward progress in relations with Israel, even if its senior leaders admit that they share Israel's view of the strategic environment in the Middle East, and that the countries' interests coincide on many issues. FIFA is now threatening punitive measures against the Saudi national team if it refuses to appear at the game scheduled for November 5, 2015 – time will tell whether this will be enough to change Saudi Arabia's position on this issue.

