

REVIEW ESSAY

Palestinian Football and the Struggle for Identity

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Although it is customary to end an article with an acknowledgment, I would like instead to begin by recognizing the contribution of my close friend and coauthor, Shireen Abu Akleh, who was known to both Arab and international audiences as “the face of the Second Intifada,” reported on Palestinian suffering and resistance with the utmost professionalism and courage, and was shot dead by an Israeli sniper on May 11, 2022 while reporting from a Jenin refugee camp. This article is a personal and political commemoration of a dear and much-missed friend, and is intended to fulfill her personal wish to publish an academic article that related to her journalistic work.

Five months before she was killed, Shireen spoke to me from the US, where she was spending Christmas and the New Year with her family, about her meeting with ‘Issam Khalidi, an expert on the history of Palestinian football. I remember thinking the subject would be of interest to my students and added reading material to the modules I teach while making a mental note to come back to her on the development of the article, without the slightest suspicion that she would be dead within six months.

Shireen’s report on Palestinian sports, which included her part of her interview with ‘Issam Khalidi, was broadcast a month after her death (Fig. 1).¹ I recall sitting and watching her report as with characteristic precision and attention to detail she began by demonstrating how fragmentation and Israeli movement restrictions have impacted Palestinian sports. She then proceeded to situate this control within a wider historical context, helping the viewer grasp the current situation more completely. At all times, she gave the impression that she fully understood her subject, and I was entirely unsurprised to later encounter an article by Khalidi, in which he wrote of how her knowledge of Palestinian sports impressed him.²

I saw Shireen as an intellectual, who was able to critically reflect on her work and invest in it in a way that set her apart from almost all of her counterparts. I valued our conversations about political developments and books and articles, which often returned to our shared concern with challenging dominant knowledge and “documenting real practical experiences.”³ Our conversations repeatedly returned to her broad interests, including pre-Nakba theater and cinema and Palestinian historical figures.⁴

¹ Al Jazeera, “al-Riyada al-Filastiniyya wa-l-Sira‘ li-l-Haya-Co-Author Abu Akleh Report,” video, 22 June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb3KS_K3tPE.

² ‘Issam Khalidi, “al-Shadiya Shirin Abu ‘Aqla Faqidat al-Riyada al-Filastaniyya,” *History of Palestine Sports* (blog), 15 May 2022, http://www.hpalestinesports.net/2022/05/blog-post_15.html.

³ Joel Onyango and Nora Ndege, “How Do We ‘Decolonise’ Research Methodologies?” STEPS Centre, 10 March 2021, <https://steps-centre.org/blog/how-do-we-decolonise-research-methodologies>. Also see Ismael Abu-Saad, “Where Inquiry Ends: The Peer Review Process and Indigenous Standpoints,” *Psychological Science* 51, no. 12 (2008): 1902–18; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

⁴ See two videos: al Jazeera, “Hadha al-Sabah Shirin Abu ‘Aqla Awwal Filastni wa-‘Arabiyya Ahtarafat al-Taswir Min Hiyya Karima ‘Abbd?” video, 8 March 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz_YK1o4mw0; and al



Figure 1. Shireen Abu Akleh interviewing 'Issam Khalidi, June 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb3KS_K3tPE.

She was not just close to people but was, to borrow from Gramsci, an “organic” intellectual who maintained personal links with former interviewees and their priorities, as was clearly shown by her reports, which repeatedly returned to Palestinian narrative, shared experience and culture and oppression, resistance, and aspiration. Despite different professional backgrounds and working environments, we converged on shared agendas, aims, and priorities. She was very keen to publish an academic article. We had often discussed coauthoring one, and had indeed prepared to work on this piece together.

Although this essay focuses on Palestinian football, it is intended to be part of a broader discussion of how Israel has targeted Palestinian culture, including cinema, education, folklore, literature, media, poetry, and theater, with the aim of silencing the Palestinian national narrative. This was of course an implicit acknowledgment, embodied in assorted and various forms of violence, of the possibility that rich literature and “cultural nationalism” could contribute to the national struggle against Zionism.⁵

Methodology

As a Palestinian academic, I am oriented toward decolonizing methodologies and epistemologies, as advocated by Linda Tuwahi Smith, who observes that “[natives] have a different epistemological tradition which frames the way we see the world, the way we organize ourselves in it, the questions we ask and the solutions we seek.”⁶ This resembles the concept of

Jazeera, “Hadha al-Sabahi Shirin Abu ‘Aqla: Dawra al-Sinima. Shahidatu ‘alay Hadarti Filastini,” video, 11 May 2019, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=ODxWgkayEiE>.

⁵ Adnan Abu-Ghazaleh, “Arab Cultural Nationalism in Palestine during the British Mandate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 1, no. 3 (1972): 37–63; Hend al-Awadhi, “On What Was, and What Remains: Palestinian Cinema and the Film Archive,” *IAFOR Journal of Media Communication & Film* 1, no. 1 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.22492/ijmcf.1.1.02>; Nur Masalha, *Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); Yousef al-Jamal, “The Resurrection of Palestinian Cinema,” *Just World Educational*, 16 January 2023, <https://justworldeducational.org/2023/01/the-resurrection-of-palestinian-cinema>.

⁶ Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 187–88.

positionality in research, which Anaheed al-Hardan describes as “the truth that was prioritized, in view of the ongoing Palestinian national struggle for liberation.”⁷ In engaging from this perspective, we come to see “how skewed the discourse can become when neutrality is determined from the perspective of the dominant standpoint alone, in absence of an analysis of the power relations it is used to describe or disguise.”⁸

This essay draws heavily on Shireen Abu Akleh’s interview with ‘Issam Khalidi, his book *One Hundred Years of Football in Palestine*, and *Filastin* newspaper sports articles.⁹ This newspaper, which was established in 1911, was an original source for Khalidi and others. In the 1940s, after the Arab Palestine Sports Federation was reestablished, it included a daily sports news column, which reflected the belief that sports was important as science in the national struggle to prepare a well-educated and healthy generation that would be able to fight colonialism.¹⁰ Aside from its other benefits, this emphasis on sports directly challenged the Zionist claim that “Palestinians lacked a cultural, social and athletic background.”¹¹ Khalidi notes that ‘Isa al-‘Isa and Yusuf al-‘Isa, editors of *Filastin* from 1921 to 1948, deliberately focused on sports with the aim of encouraging institution-building and challenging the dominance of the Greek clergy in Palestine’s Orthodox community.¹²

Shireen interviewed Khalidi in San Francisco on January 18, 2021. She selected him because, as a researcher engaged with the history of Palestinian sports, he was able to provide insight into how Zionists exploited sports to encourage Jewish immigration and construct national identity, and also how Palestinians used sports to resist and sustain the national struggle. She complained to me that the interview format limited her to around nine minutes of footage, meaning that a substantial amount of significant footage could not be used. In addition to providing interview material, Khalidi also provided photographs and documents that she used in her report.

Football in Palestine: The Mandate Period

The seeds of Palestinian football were first planted in missionary schools in the late 19th century. In 1908, football teams were established by Rawdat al Ma’aref and St. George’s School, which were respectively Muslim and Christian missionary schools. ‘Izzat Tannus, a member of St. George’s football team, saw the school as a pioneer in physical education. It introduced football to many areas of Palestine and its Saturday afternoon games had, by 1910, attracted crowds of up to five thousand, including for games against Beirut and Jerusalem teams.¹³

Khalidi explained how sports became an important part of Zionist ideology, noting how, at the second Zionist Congress in 1898, Max Nordau, the vice chairperson who cofounded the World Zionist Organization with Theodor Herzl, called for a stronger focus on athletic activities that would directly challenge the “weak Jew” caricature promulgated by anti-Semites and then internalized by Zionists. Nordau also noted how Jewish sports clubs provided military training to young Jews under the pretence that it was sports training. A *Filastin* article

⁷ Anaheed al-Hardan, “Decolonizing Research on Palestinians: Towards Critical Epistemologies and Research Practices,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (2014): 66.

⁸ I. Abu-Saad, “Where Inquiry Ends: The Peer Review Process and Indigenous Standpoints,” *Psychological Science* 51, no. 12 (2008): 47–59.

⁹ ‘Issam Khalidi, Abu Akleh interview, 18 January 2021, San Francisco.

¹⁰ “Al-Al‘ab al-Riyada,” *Filastin*, 25 October 1945, 2. For a general history, see Tamir Sorek, “The Sports Column As a Site of Palestinian Nationalism in the 1940s,” *Israel Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2007): 605–16.

¹¹ Issam Khalidi. “The Coverage of Sports News in *Filastin*: 1911–1948,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 44 (2010): 46

¹² *Ibid.*, 46, 48.

¹³ ‘Izzat Tannus, *al-Filastiniyun Madi Majid wa Mustaqbal Bahir* (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1982), 14, 16. Tannus was a Palestinian medical doctor and politician who was a member of the Palestine Arab Higher Committee in the United Nations General Assembly during the British Mandate. He also established the Arab Office in London during the 1936–39 Arab Revolt.

entitled “Jabotinsky’s Program,” translated from a Hebrew newspaper, claimed that this would concern outside countries because of the political situation.¹⁴

Zionists targeted Palestinian football just as they targeted other aspects of Palestinian culture.¹⁵ In focusing on football, Zionists acknowledged that “Palestinians expressed themselves in sports” and, by implication, that it was

a mirror that reflect[ed] political and social processes. It was not, and still is not, separated from the political conditions that Palestine went through and is still going through tens of decades later. Football was not isolated from the British-imposed mandate on Palestine, Zionist settlements, immigration and dreams [of] building the national home, [the] Nakba (the catastrophe of 1948), and Diaspora that [are present] to this day. In addition, it has been subjected to Israeli restrictions throughout the longest occupation in modern history.¹⁶

Failing to grasp this, Britain promoted football at the beginning of the mandate and established the Jerusalem Sports Club in 1920, in the (misplaced) belief that it was an apolitical activity that would not affect its colonial project. In the post-Oslo period, Israel similarly sought to use joint (apolitical) educational encounters and activities for its own purposes.¹⁷ However, unlike its British predecessors, Israel grasped the political significance of football, as was shown when the Peres Center for Peace successfully lobbied FIFA to ignore the BDS (Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions) movement.¹⁸

Sports became part of Palestinian social programs and societies that expanded in this period and played an important role in increasing Palestinian national awareness. Palestinian clubs were inclusive; clubs with “Islamic” or “Orthodox” in their name included members of other religious groups. The Arab Sport Club (ASC) football team was established in 1928 and began to play Jewish football clubs and other teams. Football became a domain in which competition between Palestinians and Zionists played out, which is why Ronald Storrs, the British military governor of Jerusalem from 1926 to 1932, stipulated that clubs should include members of all religious groups, and cautioned that sectarian clubs would create disorder and chaos.¹⁹

When Maccabi, the Zionist sports association founded in 1921, failed to uphold the principles of inclusion and nondiscrimination, its actions were tacitly tolerated by the British. Palestinians complained to the high commissioner that flying of the Zionist flag at a 12 January 1925 game clearly violated a 1920 British ordinance that banned partisan flags or emblems from sports events. The governor dismissed the complaint with the observation that it was a club and not a state flag.²⁰ A range of related provocations, including the use of the Maccabi-organized Maccabiah Games festival to bypass British restrictions on Jewish immigration, stir Jewish nationalism, and “normalize” the concept of a Jewish state, were also routinely overlooked by British administrators, as were Jews from different countries who attended games and then were smuggled into settlements.²¹ They also disregarded the propaganda value of such activities, which were entirely analogous to Jewish

¹⁴ “Barnamij Jabutinski,” *Filastin*, 6 April 1939, 3.

¹⁵ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler-Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387.

¹⁶ Issam Khalidi, *One Hundred Years of Football in Palestine* (Amman: Dar al-Shorouk, 2013), 5.

¹⁷ Nadia Naser-Najjab, *Dialogue in Palestine: The People-to-People Diplomacy Programme and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

¹⁸ “The Peres Center: Bringing Israeli and Palestinian Communities Together,” InsideFifa, 23 August 2019, <https://www.fifa.com/social-impact/fifa-foundation/news/peres-center-in-focus-3047733>.

¹⁹ “Nadi al-Quds al-Riyadi,” *Filastin*, 12 April 1921, 3; Issam Khalidi, “Sports and Aspirations: Football in Palestine, 1906–1948,” *Jerusalem Quarterly* 58 (2014): 78.

²⁰ Ward Price, “The Zionist Flag,” *Filastin*, 25 March 1925, 4.

²¹ Khalidi, “Coverage of Sports News,” 74, 55.

National Fund investments in 1920s photos of the young, fit, and athletic Jewish kibbutzniks described by Haim Kaufman:

The image of the new muscular Jew exemplified a primeval, tough, passionate type of person who worked the land and was totally familiar with the natural surroundings. In this light, athletics and sports were seen as means for developing group spirit, controlled movement, and discipline, and for serving the goal of nationalism by cultivating unity and cohesion.²²

In 1931, Palestinians responded to Zionist domination by establishing the ten-club Arab Palestine Sports Federation (APSF), one further illustration of how Palestinian political actors adapted in response to Zionist challenges in the mandate period.²³

The fraudulence of the mandate's claim to neutrality and evenhandedness was again underlined in the Arab Revolt of 1936–39, when the British punished Arab resistance by closing clubs and arresting members. This gravely impacted the APSF, hindering its coordination efforts and ultimately forcing it to suspend its activities. Meanwhile, Jewish sports continued to develop, leading some Arabs to join the Palestinian Football Association (PFA).²⁴

In 1944, Palestinian efforts to forge a consensus between football clubs bore fruit when the Palestine Sport Federation (PSF) was established and began to directly arrange games against teams from Arab countries. Khalidi refers to the following period leading up to the Nakba as a “golden period” and claims that, had it not occurred, the basis for a well-developed football movement could have been established in the 1940s, and this claim is given credence by the fact that 55 of the 65 clubs were affiliated with the PSF before 1948.²⁵

British manipulation of the weak and divided Palestinian leadership inevitably impacted cultural output, and *Filastin* did not spare Palestinian leaders by refraining from drawing direct comparisons to Jewish sports.²⁶ The newspaper also criticized leaders for not prioritizing financial support to Palestinian clubs and the general development of the sport.²⁷ Husni Husayn, the newspaper's sports news editor, also criticized the failure to acknowledge that sports activities were a deeply political part of resistance and a means through which resistance and resilience could be built in response to the ongoing challenge.²⁸

In 1925, Maccabi's application to join the International Federation of Soccer Association (FIFA) was rejected on the grounds that it was not a state representative club, leading it to establish the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) three years later. Arabs were invited to join with the aim of making it look like a representative club, and this tactic was again adopted when PFA tried to join the International Olympic Committee in 1929.²⁹

In 1929, Maccabi was registered as a FIFA member and country representative (as the Palestine Football Association), enabling Zionists to access information and even consult on the eligibility of Arab clubs to join the organization.³⁰ When Palestinians tried to register as a separate association with FIFA in 1944, they were denied and, according to Khalidi, accused of trying to break away from a PFA that was dominated by Zionists, whose Jewish character was imposed on the organization's logo, official language (Hebrew), and official

²² Haim Kaufman, “Jewish Sports in the Diaspora, Yishuv, and Israel: Between Nationalism and Politics,” *Israel Studies* 10, no. 2 (2005): 151.

²³ Naji `Alush, *al-Haraka al-Wataniya al-Filastiniya amam al-Yahud wa-l-Sihyuniyin 1882–1948* (Beirut: PLO Research Center, 1974), 18.

²⁴ Khalidi, Abu Akleh interview.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “Sports Games,” *Filastin*, 13 December 1944, 2; Abdulwahab al-Kayyali, *Palestine: A Modern History* (London: Third World Centre for Research and Publishing, 1978), 74.

²⁷ Khalidi, *One Hundred Years*, 71.

²⁸ “Al-Al`ab al-Riyadi,” *Filastin*, 28 November 1947, 3.

²⁹ Khalidi, *One Hundred Years*, 34.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27.

letterhead.³¹ PFA teams that played Egypt at the 1934 World Cup and then Greece at the following tournament did not include a single Palestinian player, and the association was at least in this respect entirely justified in presenting itself to the wider world as Jewish.³² Palestinians even required PFA permission to invite Arab teams to play them, producing a situation in which teams from Arab countries would play Jewish teams, but were denied permission to play Palestinian teams.³³ None of this prevented Jews from lambasting Arabs for failing to cooperate with the PFA.

Football after the Nakba

After 1948, Israel seized information about the history of Palestinian football and club buildings under the 1950 Absentee Property Law. Israel destroyed documents, buildings, and other infrastructure and players became refugees.³⁴ The dreams of aspiring Palestinian footballers were also shattered when they were expelled. A short film directed by Mohammed Saffouri tells the story of his grandfather, a 17-year-old footballer on a local Haifa team, who was expelled on the day he was selected to play on the Palestinian national team.³⁵ Palestinian refugees continued to play football in receiving countries, and the sport became a means of resistance and preserving national identity in exile. Palestinian clubs-in-exile were named after destroyed and colonized cities and villages.³⁶ In the Occupied Palestinian Territories, the League of Sports Clubs was established in 1975, followed by the League of Clubs three years later in the Gaza Strip. While both improved the standard of football, they were reliant on club funding fees and were also subject to various interruptions, including the First Intifada (both resumed in 1992). Sports in the Gaza Strip was more advanced because of trained coaches (who were refugees) and the support the Egyptian administration gave to the sports sector, which enabled Palestine to participate in the 1953 Arab Olympics, held in Cairo. In 1962, Palestinians established the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) and renewed their application to FIFA. However, it was rejected three years later, on the basis that Palestine did not exist.³⁷ Further applications in 1978, 1979, and 1993 also failed.³⁸

When the PFA applied to FIFA in 1964, they were widely celebrated as heroes by Palestinians because of the extensive efforts they had invested. In responding, FIFA requested many documents and substantial amounts of information and also imposed other obstacles. It eventually rejected the application, citing the pretext that the Gaza Strip remained under Egyptian administration. Thirteen years earlier, FIFA had rejected the Palestinian application on the grounds that the West Bank was part of Jordan. Khalidi told Shireen that he found a document at the FIFA headquarters in Zurich that included the names of PFA players in the mandate. He observed that the teams included Jewish and British players, but not a single Palestinian.³⁹ FIFA's rejection of a separate Palestinian association further perpetuated Israeli domination.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), established in 1964, ran committees that supported Palestinian sports activities in Arab countries. In 1968, it established the Supreme Council for Youth and Care (six years later, in 1974, it became the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports), which operated across Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, with headquarters in

³¹ Khalidi, Abu Akleh interview.

³² Khalidi, *One Hundred Years*.

³³ "Al-Al'ab al-Riyadi," *Filastin*, 15 March 1945, 2.

³⁴ Khalidi, "Coverage of Sports News," 66; Khalidi, *One Hundred Years*, 72–73, 96.

³⁵ Davide Abbatescianni, "Touchline: Scuppered Dreams of a Young Palestinian Footballer," *The New Arab*, 10 June 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/features/touchline-scuppered-dreams-palestinian-footballer>.

³⁶ Khalidi, Abu Akleh interview.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Khalidi, *One Hundred Years*, 174.

³⁹ Khalidi, Abu Akleh interview.

and callously targeting the knees of Palestinian protestors, including a Palestinian footballer, during Gaza's Great March of Return in 2018–19 also had a deep symbolic resonance.⁴⁵

Although FIFA has condemned Israel's attacks on Palestinian sports, it has never taken any punitive actions with the aim of deterring future occurrences. In June 2014, for example, it established the Monitoring Committee for Israel-Palestine and tasked it with examining Israeli violations. Three years later, a coalition of academics, activists, human rights organizations, politicians, and sports associations asked the committee to inquire into Israeli violations and to exclude six Israeli football teams based in illegal settlements across the West Bank.⁴⁶ Human Rights Watch argued that this violated human rights and urged FIFA to prohibit football matches from being held in the settlements.⁴⁷ But in October 2017, the FIFA Council indicated it would not impose sanctions or other measures on the Israeli or Palestinian football associations, and would not request any other FIFA body to do so.⁴⁸ When Rajoub, citing a BDS global campaign (Red Card Israel), called on Arab and Islamic countries to start a football boycott of a country where racist football chants are an ongoing problem (especially among Beitar Jerusalem fans), he was accused by Israeli NGOs of contradicting sports values.⁴⁹

FIFA's inaction is particularly important because, as 'Issam Khalidi explained to Shireen, "joining FIFA is an international recognition that Palestinian football has a national element. It is identity. We as Palestinians have been striving to assert our national identity through sports since the 1920s. Sports has always been about proving our existence, especially after 1948. Sports evokes national sentiments and this explains the Zionist and Israeli measures to impede it and prevent it." Shireen summarized this by adding the observation that "the struggle for identity through sports is the struggle for land."⁵⁰

In the 2022 World Cup, the BDS Movement mobilized around the slogan "Love Football, Hate Apartheid" to call for action against Israel.⁵¹ In the World Cup, the first to be held in an Arab country and the first to feature an Arab semifinalist, fans unfurled Palestinian flags and "Free Palestine" banners to express solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Arab and international fans also boycotted Israeli journalists who tried to interview them.⁵² Although this can easily (but inaccurately) be dismissed as "gesture politics," it possesses a clear political significance:

"Speaking to Israel" in this context is intended to obtain popular recognition that would legitimise and normalise the Israeli settler-colonial structure, which continues

⁴⁵ Philip Weiss and Annie Robbins, "Video Appears to Show Israeli Shot Ending Palestinian Footballer's Career As He Stands with Selfie Stick," *Mondoweiss*, 3 April 2018, <https://mondoweiss.net/2018/04/appears-palestinians-footballer>.

⁴⁶ "FIFA Urged by Organizations Representing Millions to Expel Israeli Clubs in Settlements," BDS, 19 April 2017, <https://bdsmovement.net/news/fifa-urged-organizations-representing-millions-expel-israeli-clubs-settlements>.

⁴⁷ "Israel/Palestine: FIFA Sponsoring Games on Seized Land," Human Rights Watch, 25 September 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/25/israel/palestine-fifa-sponsoring-games-seized-land>.

⁴⁸ "FIFA Council Statement on the Final Report by the FIFA Monitoring Committee Israel-Palestine," *InsideFIFA*, 27 October 2017, <https://www.fifa.com/about-fifa/organisation/fifa-council/media-releases/fifa-council-statement-on-the-final-report-by-the-fifa-monitoring-comm-2917741>.

⁴⁹ Jalal Abu Khater, "ESPN Documentary Exposes Israel's Racist Football Club," *Rights and Accountability, Electronic Intifada*, 13 November 2012, <https://electronicintifada.net/blogs/jalal-abukhater/watch-espndocumentary-exposes-israels-racist-football-club>; "Ban Apartheid Israel from Sports," BDS, 24 April 2019, <https://bdsmovement.net/red-card-israel>; "al-Rajub Yutalib al-Duwal al-'Arabiyya wa-l-Islamiyya bi-Wuqf al-Tatbi' al-Riyadi ma' Isra'il," *Ma'an News*, 28 April 2019, <https://www.maannews.net/news/982800.html?fbclid=IwAR2yj2A4zPV49tEamJyBQoqYNWd2-5ZYxdxRgnhau0LX0ukE9Aoylfa8rnA>.

⁵⁰ Khalidi, Abu Akleh interview.

⁵¹ Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel, "Love Football; Hate Apartheid; Score a Goal for Palestinian Rights," BDS, 14 November 2022, <https://bdsmovement.net/goal4palestine>.

⁵² Michael Safi, Monika Cvorak, and Nikhita Chulani, "'Free Palestine' Movement Has Spilled into World Cup 2022: Why?" *The Guardian*, 9 December 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/video/2022/dec/09/free-palestine-movement-spilled-into-world-cup-why-video>.

to dispossess Palestinians. Thus, in refusing to speak, Arab citizens are sending a straightforward message to those in power in the Middle East and in the West, that they are against normalisation without justice—regardless of how many “peace” agreements Israel signs with Arab regimes.⁵³

Shortly after the tournament ended, the Israeli army killed a 23 year old who played for a West Bank Premier League team (Thaqafi Tulkarm). The Palestinian Football Association responded by calling for a FIFA investigation.⁵⁴

Palestinians see sports as part of their struggle to achieve their national aspirations, as expressed by one national team player, who observes that “even if we do not score goals, it is enough that we represent Palestine, football unites us as players from all parts of historical Palestine.”⁵⁵ By implication, becoming a FIFA member is about more than sports and is, as Khalidi observes, about “asserting Palestinian identity on the international level [and is] about our pride in front of the world and a proof of our existence.”⁵⁶ This was at least recognized by ordinary Arab fans, if not by Arab rulers who seek to normalize their relations with a state that continues to kill Palestinian civilians (including my coauthor) with impunity. Ramzy Baroud, in claiming the Palestinian flag as a symbol of unity, asserts that this support showed “Courage and sacrifice. Refusal to surrender. Resistance. Hope.”⁵⁷ And this resistance to colonialism, imperialism, and Western domination was given even greater value by the fact that it occurred in the context of a wider sporting context all too frequently distorted and disfigured by Orientalist themes, tropes, and sentiments.⁵⁸

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⁵³ Emile Badarin, “World Cup 2022: How Arab Fans Are Speaking Truth to Israel on Palestine,” *Middle East Eye*, 2 December 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/world-cup-arab-fans-speaking-truth-israel-palestine>.

⁵⁴ K. F., “Israeli Forces Kill Palestinian Soccer Player, Wound 24 Others in Nablus,” *Wafa News Agency*, 22 December 2022, <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/132466>.

⁵⁵ Al Jazeera, “al-Fida’i.”

⁵⁶ Khalidi, Abu Akleh interview.

⁵⁷ Ramzy Baroud, “On ‘Hate’ and Love at the World Cup: Palestine Is More Than an Arab Cause,” *Middle East Monitor*, 5 December 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221205-on-hate-and-love-at-the-world-cup-palestine-is-more-than-an-arab-cause>.

⁵⁸ Jamal Abu Eisheh, Ali al-Sayegh, Samuel Munayer, Rami Rmeileh, and Zachariah Zahid, “Simply Sportswashing? A Perspective on the 2022 World Cup in Qatar,” *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 304 (2022), <https://merip.org/2022/11/simply-sportswashing-a-perspective-on-the-2022-world-cup-in-qatar>.

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