

PALESTINE, ISRAEL AND THE BEAUTIFUL GAME



Israel tried but failed to be one of the host countries of the 2020 UEFA championships. It had planned to hold the matches in an expanded Teddy stadium in Jerusalem.

The status of Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a city like no other, historically and politically. The political and religious significance of Jerusalem worldwide cannot be exaggerated. The city has sites sacred to Christians, Muslims and Jews, and for this reason the UN Resolution of 1947 that established Israel on 54% of what had been Palestine specified that Jerusalem should be internationalised: its legal status was to be that of a *corpus separatum* under UN control.

When Israel took 78% of Palestine by force in 1948 it succeeded in occupying West Jerusalem. It later overran the rest of Palestine, including East Jerusalem (and parts of Egypt and Syria) in 1967 and immediately annexed East Jerusalem, demolishing Palestinian homes and bringing Israeli settlers into the Old City – a process it has continued ever since.



Jerusalem checkpoint

The annexation of Jerusalem has since been strongly and repeatedly condemned by the UN¹; for example, it called on Israel in 1980 “to end the prolonged occupation of Arab territories occupied by Israel since 1967, including Jerusalem”.

The systematic exclusion of Palestinians

Palestinians from the West Bank or Gaza need virtually unobtainable permits to visit Jerusalem. At the same

time Israel claims Jerusalem as its capital, no other country – including the United States – recognises this; all countries have their embassies in Tel Aviv, the internationally recognised capital of Israel. Palestinians wish to share Jerusalem, in any final settlement; Israel rejects this absolutely.

time Israel is in the process of vastly extending ‘the municipality of Jerusalem’ to include a ring of massive settlements stretching deep into the West Bank and housing over 200,000 illegal Israeli settlers. This expansion, together with a network of ‘settler-only’ roads and hundreds of military checkpoints effectively cuts off the southern third of the West Bank from the rest of the Occupied Territories and makes normal life impossible. It will continue, as Israel targets 70% Jewish residency in Jerusalem, compared with the current 61%.

Israel has introduced more than 50 laws that discriminate against Palestinians – apartheid according to UN definitions – and which are enforced in the Occupied Territories. While the main impact is on housing and land, the discrimination has a detrimental effect across all aspects of Palestinian life.

Why it matters

Not only are the indigenous inhabitants being expelled to make way for settlers; archaeological excavations destroy Christian and Muslim remains, documenting and restoring only earlier sites, in an effort to claim a uniquely Jewish heritage for the area. The Al-Aqsa mosque, from which most Palestinians are excluded, is also under threat by settler groups controlling archaeological digs in the area. UNESCO has been highly critical of all these actions² and in 1974 expelled Israel from the organisation.

The wall that slices through Jerusalem’s suburbs means most Palestinians can no longer use the hospitals, schools and universities that were essential to their health and education. It also cuts off Bethlehem, from which Christian Palestinians in particular are being forced to emigrate.

Israel – a European country?

Although any map will show that Israel is part of the Middle East it has been able to establish very close ties with European governments and institutions and benefits from special trading relations and massive research grants. This, despite the fact that it has

violated more UN resolutions than any other country in the world, and does not abide by those articles in agreements with the EU that require all parties to respect European human rights law. Failure of European governments and institutions to react to these daily violations simply strengthens Israel's belief that it can act with absolute impunity.

Is sport above politics?

International sport should encourage participation, promote good relations between nations and oppose all forms of discrimination. Given the violent military occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza it is impossible for Palestinians to participate fully, like other young people.

For Israel, sport is a profoundly political issue. It is desperate to be accepted as a country like any other, and seizes upon every opportunity to emphasise its close partnership with Europe. To host matches, especially in a city it has illegally annexed and wishes to promote as its 'undivided capital' would be a major political victory. But should organisations like FIFA or UEFA be offering Israel this fig leaf?

Racism in Israeli football

Beitar, the top Jerusalem team which plays at the Teddy Stadium, is the most racist in Israel. It has never signed a player from the 20% of the country's population that is Arab, and favourite chants of supporters are "Death to Arabs" and "Beitar pure forever". When two Chechen (Muslim) players were signed up in 2013 Beitar's offices were torched by enraged fans. The two players were verbally abused and spat at, as were fellow players who had supported them, and had to travel to and from training under police protection. They left at the end of the season together with the management who signed them.

Palestinians love football too!

Soccer is a hugely popular sport in the West Bank and Gaza, with over 50 clubs, including 20 women's teams (the national women's team was founded in 2003).

However, it is hard for players to get together to practise, given the siege of Gaza and the hundreds of road blocks and arbitrary closures and arrests



Honey Thaljeh, captain of the national women's team, with Ronaldo

by the Israeli forces in the West Bank, as well as violent attacks by settlers. Young Palestinian are systematically targeted. In January 2014 19-year-old Jawhar Nasser Jawhar was shot by the IDF in both feet and one hand on his way home from the Faisal al-Husseini Stadium in the West Bank. At the same time his cousin Adam Abd al-Raouf Halabiya, aged 17, was shot in both feet. They will never play football again.

Israel prevents Palestinians from participating in international competitions, arresting members of the national football team as they try to travel to matches. National players have been imprisoned without charge or trial. Mahmoud Sarsak, star of the national team, was abducted on the way to a match and imprisoned. He went on hunger strike in 2013 and only survived after an international campaign for his release.

There is an appalling lack of pitches. East Jerusalem has a full sized pitch on the Mount of Olives, but with no spectator facilities. A smaller pitch at Silwan is under threat of destruction. In the West Bank Israelis are extremely disruptive in stopping new facilities being built and existing facilities being used. Even FIFA Goal projects have been stopped. Only half the professional teams have grounds to full international standards. In Gaza City the twice bombed ground is still unusable.

Within Israel, there are many people who want to see change, and think it can only come from outside pressure. Uzi Dann, the international sports editor of the Israeli daily newspaper *Ha'aretz*, said in 2014³: "Only threats and pressure will force the Israeli government to take action".

Suspension from sporting bodies was central to the fight against apartheid. South Africa was banned from FIFA from 1963 to 1992 and from the Olympics from 1964 to 1988. After the end of apartheid, South Africa became the first African nation to hold the World Cup, in 2010.

Excluding Israel from the community of sporting nations until it abides by international law could help to bring about the transformation that, in the long term, will benefit both Palestinians and Israelis.

1 See the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in Occupied Palestinian Territory: www.ochaopt.org

2 E.g. "Executive Board adopts five decisions concerning UNESCO's work in the occupied Palestinian and Arab Territories": 21.10.2010 – UNESCO PRESS.

3 www.aljazeera.com/sport/football/2014/04/should-israel-be-kicked-out-fifa-20144188948651966.html.

