

Political Interference in Football: Between Allowance and Prohibition – A Comparative Analysis of the Ukrainian-Russian Conflict and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Belabbes Ali Abdelhafidh

Doctorate student at the University of Oran 2 Algeria

belabbes.aliabdelhafidh@univ-oran2.dz

Received:01/02/2025,

Accepted:20/06/2025,

Published: 30/06/2025

ABSTRACT: Football, often regarded as a language that can bridge borders, increasingly finds itself at the epicentre of political conflicts worldwide. In this article, through two case studies, namely, the Ukrainian-Russian and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, we analyze the intersection between politics and football and, through comparative analysis, comprehend how political intervention in football takes form, from state-sponsored programs to outright bans and gauge whether such interventions can ever be warranted or counterproductive to the integrity of the sport. In an analysis backed by academic work, FIFA laws, examples drawn through history, and current events, it is argued in this article that even when football can serve as a platform for political expression, excessive intervention can threaten its unifying role. By studying these case studies in detail, in an attempt to shed light on moral concerns regarding political intervention in football, frameworks for resolving them have been proposed in this article.

KEYWORDS: football - conflict – sports – politics – war

المخلص: تجد كرة القدم، التي غالبًا ما يُنظر إليها على أنها لغة قادرة على عبور الحدود، نفسها بشكل متزايد في بؤرة الصراعات السياسية في جميع أنحاء العالم. في هذه المقالة، ومن خلال دراستي حالة، وهما النزاع الأوكراني الروسي والنزاع الفلسطيني الإسرائيلي، نحلل التقاطع بين السياسة وكرة القدم، ومن خلال التحليل المقارن، نفهم كيف يتشكل التدخل السياسي في كرة القدم، من البرامج التي تزعاه الدولة إلى الحظر الصريح، ونقيس ما إذا كانت هذه التدخلات مبررة أو تأتي بنتائج عكسية على نزاهة الرياضة. يقدم هذا المقال في تحليل مدعوم بالعمل الأكاديمي، وقوانين الفيفا، وأمثلة مستقاة من التاريخ، والأحداث الراهنة، بأنه حتى عندما تكون كرة القدم منصة للتعبير السياسي، فإن التدخل المفرط يمكن أن يهدد دورها التوحيدي. ومن خلال دراسة دراسات الحالة هذه بالتفصيل، في محاولة لتسليط الضوء على المخاوف الأخلاقية المتعلقة بالتدخل السياسي في كرة القدم، تم اقتراح أطر لحلها في هذا المقال.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كرة القدم - الصراع - الرياضة - السياسة - الحرب .

Introduction

Football is not a simple game, but a spectacle with deep social and political overtones. As a spectacle consumed by a massive worldwide audience, it holds a unique capacity for overcoming gaps of nationality, ethnicity, religion, and ideology between nations and peoples. But when nations use football for political communications, tension between the idealistic aspirations of the sport and its real political engagements arises. Ukrainian-Russian and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts make rich case studies for describing when and why football becomes a battleground for grander ideological contests. Both conflicts reveal tension between national identity, international diplomacy, and sporting ethics.

The objective of this paper is to respond to three important questions: How and when political intervention takes form in football during times of increased geopolitical tension? What is its impact for the integrity and worldwide reputation of the sport? Can a middle path between political expression and excluding excessive political intervention be pursued? By investigating these cases, we hope to shed new insights into political intervention in football and introduce frameworks for resolving such ethical dilemmas.

Political Interference in Football: A Theoretical Framework

The relationship between politics and sport has been a matter of widespread discussion. According to Giulianotti (2015), "sports cannot be divorced from their socio-political contexts," for they represent society and its values and powers. Likewise, according to Bairner (2001), sports have political dimensions in and of themselves, allowing for national unity and national pride to be championed through them. For instance, hosting high-profile events such as the FIFA World Cup and Olympics is often a tool for countries to exercise soft power and gain a boost in terms of international position.

The governing council for football, FIFA, explicitly prohibits political intervention in its statutes, specifically in Article 13, stating that "discrimination of any kind against a country, private person, or group of persons on account of race, skin color, ethnic, national or social origin[...] is strictly prohibited" (FIFA Statutes, 2023). Yet, political intervention continues, and questions arise regarding compliance with laws and accountability. Scholars such as Spaaij (2017) have determined that governing bodies in sport practice a delicate balancing act between maintaining neutrality and dealing with moral

requirements, particularly in terms of protecting human rights and committing acts of violence.

Moreover, commercialization of modern football brings additional complications to such a problem. Armstrong (2014) claims that "the financial interests of clubs, sponsors, and broadcasters often overshadow ethical considerations," and therefore, political dilemmas receive disparate approaches. As a consequence, soccer is both touted for its unifying powers and criticized for being an apparatus for propaganda and exploitation at the same time.

Case Study 1: The Ukrainian-Russian Conflict

Background

The annexation of Crimea in 2014 between Russia and Ukraine started a long-standing dispute between them, with important consequences for the sport of football. Due to the ongoing war, clubs including FC Shakhtar Donetsk have been forced to relocate, effectively cutting ties with national leagues and fan communities (Kassimeris & Kassimeris, 2016). There have, at the same time, been accusations that Russian clubs have received an edge through state backing, creating concerns about competition integrity.

In reaction to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia in February 2022, FIFA and UEFA took unprecedented actions in suspending all Russian clubs and national teams from international competition (UEFA Statement, 2022). The move received praise for taking a moral stance against aggressions, but criticism in certain corners for being political in its motivation. For one, Russian authorities argued that the ban encroached on FIFA's neutrality principle, but Ukrainian fans saw it as a critical move in isolating a country behaving in an aggressor role.

Political Interference

The move involved more than competitive activity alone. Players and coaches in Russia experienced international shunning, with many seeing lucrative opportunities abroad taken away from them. In contrast, Ukrainian footballers became a source of resilience, participating in fund-raising games and awareness-raising campaigns for raising awareness about the ongoing conflict. Notable in such efforts is Andriy Yarmolenko, a key player for Ukraine, who leveraged his platform to promote peace and condemn actions taken by Russia (BBC Sport, 2022).

Implications

The suspension of Russian football helps to illustrate tension between neutrality and imposing ethical standards. As Spaaij (2017) puts it, “sporting bodies face a dilemma when geopolitical crises spill over into the sporting arena.” Despite its intention to deliver a strong message of anti-military aggression, it at the same time emphasized the challenge of decoupling soccer from political factors. Opponents argue that such a move sets a dangerous precedent, one that could potentially lay the ground for future political sanctions over sporting ones.

The ban, in addition, produced unintended consequences. Russian soccer fans, many of whom disapproved of the fighting, felt alienated and punished for events over which they had no control. This raises critical questions about collective culpability and whether punishing whole groups through sport brings about meaningful repercussions.

Case Study 2: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

Background

The Palestinian-Israeli dispute spilled over into football, taking the form of controversy over team representation, venue selection, and player eligibility. The Palestine Football Association (PFA) has long supported boycotts of Israeli national teams, citing discriminatory behavior towards football players and restrictions on freedom of movement in occupied lands (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Examples include restrictions for Palestinian players when attempting to move for international competition and having gear taken at checkpoints.

Political Interference

The inclusion of Israel in the Union of European Associations of Football (UEFA) during its occupation of Palestinian lands has been a source of controversy. Opponents claim that Israel takes advantage of European privileges with no regard for its role towards Palestinian players. In contrast, Israeli officials claim that its integration with UEFA is motivated by geographical and logistical considerations, not political motives (Bishara, 2019).

Efforts to address these grievances have produced mixed outcomes. In 2018, FIFA shot down a motion to suspend Israel, citing a lack of proper evidence for alleged abuses. Nevertheless, nothing is ever addressed, with continued calls for transparency and accountability. Palestinian football players consistently face obstacles, including arbitrary arrests and intimidation at the hands of Israeli security, which they claim violate FIFA’s fair competition and anti-discrimination values (Amnesty International, 2020).

Implications

The Palestinian-Israeli case illustrates how deeply entrenched historical grievances can manifest in sports. As Armstrong (2014) observes, “football mirrors the asymmetries of power present in society,” making it a microcosm of larger political struggles. The lack of resolution underscores the limitations of sporting bodies in mediating complex geopolitical disputes.

Moreover, the situation highlights the difficulty of distinguishing legitimate political advocacy from biased interference. While the PFA frames its demands as a fight for equality and justice, Israeli officials view them as attempts to delegitimize their statehood. This polarization reflects broader divisions within the international community, complicating efforts to achieve consensus.

Comparative Analysis

Both case studies have significant similarities and differences. In both cases of conflict, football is a proxy for larger political battles, with both groups using the sport to promote their cause. However, the forms of intervention differ distinctly. In both cases of Ukrainian-Russian and Israeli-Palestinian conflict, FIFA took sanctioning actions in an attempt to condemn aggressions; yet, in the Israeli-Palestinian case, such actions have failed to implement sanctions effectively.

The most significant contrast can be seen in terms of international agreement. Widespread condemnation of actions in Russia facilitated quick actions taken by FIFA and UEFA, in contrast to political contentiousness in the Israeli-Palestinian case, which hindered strong actions. This contrast reflects the role played by international geopolitics in shaping dynamics in the sporting sphere.

A second important contrast concerns severity of consequences. Ukrainian-Russian fighting interrupted whole leagues and displaced over a thousand followers, in contrast to Israeli-Palestinian fighting, which concerns individual players and minor clubs predominantly. Yet, both cases illustrate how football accentuates current inequalities and tension, acting both as a reflection of social realities and a driving force for social change.

Ethical Dilemmas and Proposed Solutions

The preceding discussion brings out several ethical dilemmas surrounding political intervention in football:

1. Neutrality and Morality: Do sports governing bodies maintain neutrality, even in extreme abuses of human rights and acts of aggressions?
2. Responsibility: Can whole nations or nations' populations be penalized for actions taken by their governing organs?
3. Consistency: How can FIFA ensure uniform application of laws and not appear selective in its actions?

To address these conundrums, we make the following propositions:

- Set up Independent Arbitration Commissions: Create objective panels in charge of investigating political intervention claims and advising on appropriate actions.
- Encourage Reconciliation and Negotiations: Engage conflicting parties in dialogue to settle disputes in a friendly manner, with a view to mutual respect and accommodation.
- Increase Transparency: Publish full reports explaining political intervention-related decisions, in a manner that promotes accountability and inspires trust in society.

Conclusion

Political interference in soccer is a double-edged sword: it holds the potential to amplify marginalized communities' voices and correct wrongs, but can at the same time politicize a field traditionally seen as a-political, and erode trust and legitimacy in the process. To navigate effectively through such a delicate balancing act, governing bodies must have in place explicit protocols for dealing with political issues and protecting the integrity of the sport.

Subsequent investigations must explore alternative dispute resolution structures, such as independent arbitration panels, or cooperative regional frameworks. Ultimately, soccer's success in uniting disparate communities will depend on its success in staying a-political and inclusive, even in times of high political tension.

References

- Amnesty International. (2020). "Denied a Future: Obstacles Facing Palestinian Athletes." Retrieved from <https://www.amnesty.org>
- Armstrong, G. (2014). *Football, Politics, and Identity*. Routledge.

- Bairner, A. (2001). *Sport, Nationalism, and Globalization: European and North American Perspectives*. State University of New York Press.
- BBC Sport. (2022). "Andriy Yarmolenko Speaks Out Against War." Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/sport>
- Bishara, M. (2019). "Palestinian Football Under Occupation." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 43(2), 145-162.
- FIFA Statutes. (2023). Retrieved from <https://www.fifa.com/legal/statutes>
- Giulianotti, R. (2015). *Sport: A Critical Sociology*. Polity Press.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). "'Kick Them Out': Discrimination Against Palestinians in Israeli Football." Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org>
- Kassimeris, C., & Kassimeris, G. (2016). "War and Football: The Impact of Armed Conflict on Sport." *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 33(10), 1075-1092.
- Spaaij, R. (2017). "Sport and Geopolitics: A Critical Review." *Geopolitics*, 22(3), 645-663.
- UEFA Statement. (2022). "Suspension of Russian Teams from Competitions." Retrieved from <https://www.uefa.com>