

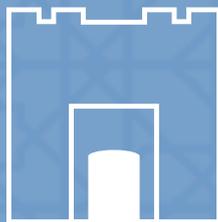
FOOTBALL A SYRIAN ELEGY

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Photo: Syrian National Team (1947). Credit: Syrianhistory.com

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

Football was a big part of my life as a teenager, making me absolutely no different from a billion other young men around the world. It consumed much of my time, along with basketball, pirated DVDs, homework, reading and eating. Not only were there an almost endless array of European league matches on TV after satellite dishes had mushroomed over Aleppo but matches with friends were a highlight of the week. Six of us would pile into a car and drive to al-Jabbanat or the Cemeteries, a small concrete pitch in the middle of the Maronite Christian graveyard and next to the Armenian Orthodox cemetery in the northeast of the city. At the corner of Mikhayel Naima and Hittin streets, it was a 20-meter by 40-meter rectangle of broken asphalt. You thought very carefully before attempting a sliding tackle.

Our group would head out on the road to the Kurdish area of the city to that small hard pitch surrounded by pale sandstone graves. Since those days, the area has seen some heavy fighting and is cut off from the ever decreasing number of Armenians in the western half of the city. The government had to give the Armenian community a new plot in the west to bury their dead.

Syrians, including Syrian-Armenians, had a complex relationship with sports. Most of us loved football but we were more passionate about foreign teams rather than local clubs. For me it was Real Madrid and Arsenal, teams with devoted supporters around the world. These games were widely broadcast, with most tuning into Al Jazeera Sports to watch rather than state television. Watching a Champions League match on Syrian television was a desultory affair. Invariably the broadcast started after the game had begun as technicians hacked into a satellite feed. Commentary was distinctly low energy, an occasional muttered comment after a goal followed by long drifts of silence. The Turkish channels and Aljazeera provided more choice and were soon being shown in cafes across the country for those who could not afford the subscriptions for dishes at home. Fans started imitating Aljazeera's manic commentators whose enthusiasm exceeded that of an entire stadium at home.

When it came to basketball, however, Armenians were quite passionate. This doesn't mean that Armenians loved basketball more than football but there were two Armenian basketball teams, and they were good enough to play in the top league. The sole Armenian soccer team, also al-Yarmouk, played in the lowly third division.

I trained with the al-Uroubeh¹ basketball team for years, though I never got to play an official game because I didn't have Syrian nationality. My family kept its Armenian citizenship after moving to Aleppo in the 1990s. To work legally in Syria as a foreigner you had to have a contract and to get a contract your employer had to prove no local person was available for the job. I was certainly not the most talented basketball player in Syria, so I never got a contract. I couldn't understand the logic back then.

¹ Al-Uroubeh was established in 1972. The football team was the result of merger between Vaspurakan and the Armenian Athletic Association, two other Syrian-Armenian football teams. After coming to power in 1970, Hafez al-Assad, decided to merge and rename many teams.



Syrian U-17 National Football Team, 2015.

Photo credit: FIFA

We're not that good at football in Syria but we have an inexhaustible supply of optimism. The highest we ever got in the FIFA rankings was 54th back in the 1970s. We'd slumped to 154th by September 2014 when the war had taken its toll. We went as low as 174th. The last time I looked we were 104th, ahead of Kyrgyzstan and behind Swaziland. The coach of the national team has been replaced 25 times since 2000, surely the one football record that Syria holds.

Syria has never made it to a World Cup. The national team almost went to Mexico in 1986, before I was born. Even if we weren't represented, the World Cup was still a massive event for us in Aleppo. Brazilian flags dominated areas of the city, draped over balconies. Quite a few Syrians and Lebanese live in Brazil, where they are known as Turcos. They have mostly been there since before the Ottoman Empire fell, hence their Brazilian name. But Syrian allegiance to the Little Canaries was purely because of their style and skill.¹ Germany and Argentina were also popular. Underdogs didn't get a lot of support. In a country that claims to be the beating heart of Arab nationalism indeed the national anthem describes the country as the "den of Arabism," you would expect Syrians to support other Arab teams before Brazil. That was not the case.

In 2012, we won the West Asian Football Federation Championship, beating Iraq in the finals with the desultory score of 1-0. Iraq had been at war for nearly a decade whereas our descent was just beginning. But there might be better news ahead. Our Under-17 team won a place at the World Cup in Chile in 2015. They didn't make it past the first round but the fact that they were there at all perhaps bodes well for the future.

I never went to see the Aleppo teams al-Ittihad or al-Hurrieh play. The quality of the play was not that great, the stadium where al-Ittihad played was 45 minutes away in a taxi and the crowds were laced with a collective male menace that didn't make it an enjoyable day out. Few Armenians ever went to matches in Aleppo.

Outside the Armenian community, local football was much loved and watched. Thousands of working class Aleppians gathered every Friday to support their favorite team in the stadium or from behind the screen. For the fans, football was not very political, most of them didn't care about the politics behind the management of the clubs, or the corruption and lack of professionalism. But in Syria just letting thousands of men full of energy gather in one place was quite political in itself, "They went there to shed their negative energy," said one Aleppian fan.²

Sometimes this negative energy turned violent. In 2008, fans of al-Talia from Hama were enraged by their loss to al-Karameh so they attacked the referee and injured some players. Usually before a match ended in Homs, many people, and particularly car owners, would rush to the farthest point from the stadium to avoid the departing mob.

Homs fans were notorious but they were not the only ones to take out some frustrations in the stands. Located in northwest Syria, al-Qamishli is home to a significant Kurdish population. On 12 March 2004, the mostly Kurdish local team, al-Jihad, hosted al-Futuweh, from the tribal city of Der az-Zor. During the match, a fight broke out between the fans, leading to the deaths of several people. This sparked off riots in several cities. The authorities crushed the protests in a week. How it all started is murky but the situation seems to have turned sour when fans exchanged taunts. Al-Futuweh fans praised the late Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein, who had used chemical weapons against Iraqi Kurds in Halabja in 1988. The Kurdish fans responded by celebrating George W. Bush, whose invasion of Iraq in 2003 had been popular in their community. At the time, many in Syria thought they might be the next target of regime change.

Football clubs, as is often the case, represented something deep about urban identity and class. In Aleppo, al-Ittihad and al-Hurrieh were the two main clubs. Even though they were both established by city notables in the 1950s, they had taken on different associations, representing respectively the wealthy Arab Sunni elite and the urban poor from all backgrounds. Surprisingly given the unstated importance of sectarianism in political life, religion was not a factor, according to Mohammed Lutfi, a former administrator of al-Hurrieh.

The Baath Party dominated the General Sports Federation, as it dominated all civic organizations. And like all institutions in Syria, the GSF was corrupt and inefficient. Lutfi thinks that poor management and administration at the club level was the main obstacle to improving football. "The talent and sports infrastructure were there, that was not a problem; professional administrations, that what was missing."

Today, Syrian-Armenians aren't much associated with football. Few people know that across much of the last century, Syrian-Armenian football teams were worthy competitors and frequent trophy winners. It started with the Armenian General Athletic Union or Homenetmen, whose branch in Syria opened in 1925. Soon other teams emerged such as Vaspurakan and the Armenian Athletic Association. Before the Syrian professional league started in 1966, the main tournament in the city was the Aleppo Cup.

Football arrived in the Ottoman Empire after the coup d'état against Sultan Abdul Hamid II by the "Young Turks" in 1908. Sports were part of their policy to appear secular and western. Soon after the coup there were professional Ottoman sportsmen and sportswomen including Ottoman-Armenians. At the 1912 Olympics in Sweden, one of the two sportsmen who represented Ottoman Turkey was an Armenian athlete, Yervant Derounian. Football soon



Nouri al-Ibish

Photo credit: Syrianhistory.com

became a popular sport. Several Armenian teams were founded. The First World War and the 1915 genocide dispersed Armenians around the collapsing empire with many ending up in Aleppo. Nouri al-Ibish a Damascene aristocrat, introduced football to Syria in 1919 along with some friends. In 1920, in a proud moment, his side beat a team of British soldiers.³

At the Vaspurakan club, located in the mostly Armenian district of al-Midan, older members would happily tell you about the glory days. Evidence of their golden past was large silver-gilt shield hanging in the club house that the team earned by winning the National Shield Championship seven times between 1947 and 1957. This championship was a special tournament organized to celebrate independence. The players were the first and second generation who had moved to Aleppo after surviving the Armenian genocide. They were competing with several strong teams such as al-Nisr al-Umawi (Umayyad Eagle), Bani Hamdan, Homenetmen, and others. Today Vaspurakan's building lies on the frontline and it is out of use. Their trophies are hidden at the home of one of the members.

It was a major event when Homenetmen and Vaspurakan met. According to the number of trophies they got and finals they played, these two were the best in 1940s and 1950s.⁴ No one wanted to miss it, said Dr Darakjian, a member of Germanik Vaspurakan Cultural Union. "Back then, there were no TVs or cell phones so the supporters of each team would bring doves from their homes and when their team scored a goal, they would release some of the doves so those who did not make it to the stadium could be updated about the score. It was a great event. It was a nice day out for people. Even women would



في عام ١٩٤٧ وضعت بلدية حلب بمناسبة الذكرى الاولى
للعيد الوطني (عيد الجلاء) درعا فضيّا لمدة عشرة أعوام ، لاجراء
بطولات الدوري عليه .

الدرع الوطني مؤلف من عشرة أجزاء مثبتة على قاعدة
خشبية طولها ٦٠ سم وعرضها ٤٠ سم . في الوسط مثبتة صفيحة
فضية بالعرض . سجلت عليها العبارة التالية : « بطولة كرة القدم
الدورية للعيد الوطني » .

عند انتهاء البطولة في كل عام ، الفريق الفائز كان يحتفظ
بالدرع عاما كاملا ، وكان يسجل اسمه على أحد الأجزاء العشرة
المخصصة لذلك العام . الفريق الفائز بالبطولة كان لا يشارك في مباريات
التصفيّة في العام التالي ، بل كان يلعب فقط المباراة النهائية مع
الفريق الذي كان يصل الى المباراة النهائية نتيجة التصفيات .

استطاع فريق نادي فاسبوراك أن يحرز هذه البطولة
سبع مرات ، والهومتسن مرتين ، وفي عام ١٩٥٣ لم تجر البطولة .
امتلك نادي فاسبوراك الدرع العضي نهائيا بالشكل الآتي :



go and cheer their teams. Now it's a no-woman zone.”

Syrian-Armenian football was affected by all the major political changes in Syria. After independence in 1946 all sports clubs had to have Arabic names. Vaspurakan was renamed as al-Ahd al-Jadid (The New Era), Homentmen to al-Nadi al-Suri (the Syrian Club) and Armenian Athletic Association to al-Istiklal (Independence). In the 1980s, Syrian-Armenian football had already declined. When the Baath party took over, a decade earlier they renamed the clubs again.⁵ Al-Ahly became al-Ittihad, al-Arabi became al-Hurrieh, Homentmen became al-Yarmouk, and Vaspurakan and Armenian Athletic Association football clubs merged under the name al-Uroubeh,

It didn't please Armenians but they took consolation in that it was a time when Armenians played a leading role in the sport. Avedis Kavlakian, often described as the best Syrian player of the century, was coach of the national team between 1983 and 1985 and Kevork Mardikian, captained it from 1979-85.

Our descent was fast and sudden when it came to both war and football. The 2010-2011 season was called off in its entirety. Civil war leaves little untouched. You more or less have to take a side or you leave. Footballers did all those things, leaving diminished teams struggling with their third string players. Firas al-Khatib, one of the best players ever in Syria, declined to play for the national team again and left the country in 2012, first for Iraq, then China and now Kuwait. Players for al-Wathbah, the Homs club, were killed in a mortar attack outside their hotel in Damascus while getting ready for training.

When war blazed across the country in 2011, Syrian soccer was on the verge of its greatest triumph ever – a possible spot at the London Olympics.⁶ At that level, it is youth teams that compete and Syria's Under 23s looked promising. Among its best players was the goalkeeper, Abdelbasset Saroot, who played for the Homs team al-Karameh. In April 2011, he joined the demonstrations in Homs, prompting the government to accuse him of being a Salafi extremist and offering a two million Syrian pounds reward for his arrest. The National Sports Association issued a decree banning him from playing for life. In July 2011, a video appeared on Youtube of him standing before a Syrian national flag. “I am now wanted by the security agencies which are trying to arrest me. I declare with sound mind and of my own volition that we, the free people of Syria, will not back down until our own and only demand is met: the toppling of the regime. I hold the Syrian regime responsible for anything that happens to me.”

By the time of the last qualifying rounds in early 2012, FIFA had decided it was too dangerous to play in Syria so the national team was abroad, surrounded by bullying minders and missing their talented and charismatic goalie. The team beat the Asian Champions Japan 2-1. They then wiped out Malaysia 3-0 in an empty stadium in Jordan. Japan fought back by beating Bahrain, meaning that there would be no automatic qualification for Syria. The next stop was Vietnam and two more games.

Meanwhile Saroot had been forced underground. Assassination attempts by the regime had killed two brothers and best friend. After the first attempt, he had appeared in another Youtube video, seriously



Abdelbasset Saroot
depicted from “The Return to Homs” documentary

injured but defiant. Known also for his voice, he appeared in front of enormous crowds in Homs to sing revolutionary songs.⁷ Young, handsome, articulate and possessed of a defiant charisma, he emerged as an icon of the revolution, carried overhead by adoring crowds. The documentary “The Return to Homs” by the filmmaker Talal Derki portrayed him as a young symbol of a leaderless revolution who only resorted to violence when nonviolent resistance seemed futile.

Saroot’s trajectory mirrors that of so many young Syrians. The government’s murder of his siblings and friends pushing him to a probably reluctant association with violent extremists. He was said to have joined Jabhet An-Nusra, the now renamed group that was once allied with Al Qaeda. He then was said to have moved further along the path of extremism, signing up for ISIS, although it is unclear how much he supported them. Apparently disgusted by their violence, he is still in Homs but part of a less religious, more nationalist group, still protesting the regime during rare moments of peace. With soccer, singing and an easy manner with fans, he never would have been a good fit with ISIS.

In July 2016, ISIS were said to have beheaded four young men who had played for the al-Shabab team, once Raqqa’s favorites before ISIS banned the sport. They were accused of spying for the Kurdish YPG militia that has been pushing back ISIS positions. Photos circulated of children being made to inspect the bodies while the heads were neatly lined up nearby. Soccer is un-Islamic, according to ISIS, and they have made its enjoyment punishable by death. In March 2016, a suicide bomber killed 26 at a football stadium in Iskandriyah in southern Baghdad. Two months later ISIS gunmen and two suicide bombers

killed 16 men in a café in Balad, just north of Baghdad. They were part of a group of passionate Real Madrid supporters who gathered to watch matches together. Nobody much noticed the deaths amid the endless slaughter in the region, but Real Madrid players wore black arm bands in their honor at their next match.

Football has featured often in ISIS attacks. Two suicide bombers tried to blow up the Stade de France during a German-French friendly attended by President Francois Hollande. It was the start of the attacks in Paris that killed 130 but might have been much worse had the bombers got into the stadium. One of the Brussels airport bombers, Mohammad Abrini, had photographs of Manchester United's Old Trafford Stadium and Aston Villa's grounds on his phone, leading to speculation they might be targets.⁸

During the World Cup in 2014, the web site Vocative examined Facebook and other social media sites associated with jihadis and found that, unsurprisingly, football was a popular subject. Algeria attracted the most support among al-Qaeda fans followed by Italy, perhaps because Serie-A games are widely broadcast in the Middle East. Hamas favored Brazil, England and France, while Hezbollah went heavily for Brazil as well with barely any members showing interest in their fellow Shia backers, Iran.⁹

Although officially opposed to football, ISIS has shown some ambivalence. On the one hand they see it as a western invention that diverts people away from fulfilling their Islamic obligations. On the other, they feature it in their propaganda to show the joyful lives of recruits. Banning soccer is not a way to attract young men. James Dorsey, an international relations scholar who also writes on Middle Eastern football, examined the tensions that surround the issue. Soccer stadiums have been valuable targets for ISIS but the Iraqi government has been able to display its defiance by staging matches across the country or by showing World Cup games in stadiums. Even religious scholars seem confused. In Saudi Arabia, one religious authority said soccer was allowed but not competitions. "Contests are only permissible when they can be sought for help in fighting Kuffar (disbelievers) like that of camels, horses, arrows, and the like of other fighting machines such as planes, tanks and submarines, whether they are held for prizes or not. Whereas if these games are not sought for help in wars like football, boxing and wrestling, it is impermissible to take part in them if the contests include prizes for winners" (The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, Fatwa no 332.)¹⁰ The Saudi government, enthusiastic backers of the national team, chose to ignore this advice.

ISIS seems to feel the same way about competitions. In a letter posted on a jihadi web site, it suggested FIFA find somewhere other than Qatar to host the World Cup. "We sent you a message in 2010, when you decided or were bribed by the former emir of Qatar to have the 2022 World Cup in Qatar. Now, after the establishment of the Caliphate, we declare that there will be no World Cup in Qatar since Qatar will be part of the Caliphate under the rule of the Caliph Ibrahim Bin Awad Alqarshi who doesn't allow corruption and diversion from Islam in the land of the Muslims. This is why we suggest that you decide to replace Qatar. The Islamic State has long-range scud missiles that can easily reach Qatar, as the Americans already know."

It must have been difficult for Ibrahim Bin Awad Alquraishi, also known by his nom de guerre Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to authorize the release of this warning to FIFA. A special bond connected him to football. While working in a local mosque in the al-Tobaji neighborhood in Baghdad he set up a football team with the mosque regulars, appointing himself captain. He jokingly claimed to be the Maradona of Iraq¹¹ and indeed it seems he was a talented player.¹² In the Syrian jihadi scene a connection to football has been common. The list includes Abu Muhammad al-Golani, the head of Jabhet Fatah ash-Sham, the former Jabhet an-Nusra, who was a big fan of local and international football. The Aleppian Jihadi ideologue Abu Musab al-Suri passionately supported the Syrian team during the 1987 Mediterranean Games. He must have been so happy when Syria beat France 2-1 in the final.¹³

Saudi scholars, some of whom hold much sway in Syria these days, even tried to rewrite the rules of football to make it compliant with the Koran. An anonymous fatwa published as the Saudi team prepared for the 2006 World Cup read: “If you ... intend to play soccer, play to strengthen the body in order to better struggle in the way of God on high and to prepare the body for when it is called to jihad. Soccer is not for passing time or the thrill of so-called victory.” The game should be played in anything – “one half or three halves” -- not the internationally accepted two halves of 45 minutes each “which is the official time of the Jews, Christians and all the heretical and atheist countries.”

But jihadi recruiters know that nothing bonds people together quite like football. The anthropologist Scott Altran has written that being part of an action oriented group of friends is a key predictor of signing up to a jihadi group.¹⁴ Teammates have been known to sign up for violence together; the Madrid bombers all played football together. The reasons societies value sports for young men – the inculcation of discipline and teamwork – are highly regarded by violent groups as well.

Football is politics in Syria. But there again, almost everything is politics in Syria under Baathism. Sport existed to boost the national image and the national image was the Assads. Inevitably sports reflected the deeper realities of their rule as much as anything else. The story of the Aleppo International Stadium is the story of Syria during some of our darker years.

The 1980s were not good times in Syria. The regime of Hafez al-Assad was creaking. Its main patrons in Moscow were going through difficult times as well. The economy was struggling as it tried some tentative steps at opening up and the government was increasingly unpopular as the population suffered grinding poverty. Opposition steadily emerged, mostly from the Muslim Brotherhood. The underground movement assassinated many military and security personnel. It almost managed to kill Hafez Al-Assad himself in 1980 when grenades and gunfire were aimed at him at a diplomatic reception. The regime responded the next day with the infamous prison massacre in Palmyra. After more than 5 years of insecurity, Assad brutally repressed uprisings in Aleppo and Hama, shelling part of the cities indiscriminately, killing as many as 25,000 in Hama and sending a deep chill through the society. Motorcycles, sometimes used in attacks on officials, were banned in some cities and all men and boys over 14 had to

visit government offices to get new identity cards. Many disappeared.

To polish their image amid this turmoil, the government bid to host the 1987 Mediterranean Games. Many of the events were to be held in a new stadium in Aleppo. It was to be among the most modern in the Middle East, a showpiece for the regime. In fact, it mostly just showed up the realities of the regime. A Polish architect and an engineer, Stanley Karpziel and Stanislaw Kus, were selected as the designers for what would be one of the largest reinforced concrete stadiums in the world, designed to seat 75,000 for the opening ceremony of the Games. Everything about it was a display of optimism. There was to be parking for 8,000 cars in a country where almost nobody could afford to own one.¹⁵

The Games did go ahead but in Latakia, not Aleppo. The stadium was not ready. It would not be ready for another 20 years. Like every major construction project in Syria, it was a huge opportunity for corruption. Funds drained away into private accounts. As the government tried to open up the economy, what actually happened was a massive diversion of state funds into the hands of a few Assad cousins and other cronies. Making sure the stadium was never finished just kept the money flowing. Nothing changed until Bashar al-Assad took over from his father in 2000. He was intending to bring some reforming zeal to Syria, to brush away the bureaucracy that kept its dead hand on the economy. By 2003, newspaper articles started to appear saying that Bashar was taking a personal interest in the stadium. It was clear that this meant corruption would be reduced and the stadium would be finished.

And finally it was actually finished. The opening event was a football match between al-Ittihad, and the venerable Turkish team Fenerbahce in April 2007. This friendly between neighbors was to be enjoyed by then Prime Minister and now President of Turkey Recep Tayyep Erdogan and his wife, as well as Syria's first couple. It was a sign of a new, warmer relationship between the neighbors, which had spent decades on opposite sides of the Cold War. Erdogan and Bashar had decided it was time for a rapprochement.

Authoritarian governments often talk about keeping politics out of sports, but sports are never free of politics. Not only had it taken Bashar's involvement to get the stadium finished but the larger sports complex where it was located was named after his older brother Basel, the real heir, the horseman and soldier rather than the nerdy, weak-chinned ophthalmologist. Basel ended his father's dynastic dream by driving his Mercedes into a pillar on the airport road in Damascus in 1994. Bashar was summoned back from medical training in London to be groomed in his place.

For this match, even the choice of teams was important. Turkey's national team was ranked 16th in the world at the time, whereas Syria was 91 places behind them. It was diplomatically decided that the country's two best club teams would play rather than the mismatched national sides. Conveniently, Erdogan's favorites, the Istanbul team Fenerbahce, was both the top Turkish club at the time and owned by one of his cronies. Aleppo's al-Ittihad team was top of the Syrian league. Ittihad, meaning "the union" is a favorite name for football teams in Arab countries – nine countries have similarly named teams – reflecting what the Oxford political scientist Philip Robin described as "the preoccupation and indeed



The Syrian National Football Team during a qualifying game in Turkey in 1947

Photo credit: Syrianhistory.com

precariousness of national unity in many Middle East countries and its consequent aspiration.”

Turkey and Syria had last played a friendly in 1955. They rarely met in sporting competitions. Kemalist Turkey had insisted on its essentially European identity and joined UEFA whereas Syria was part of the Asian Football Confederation. In 1949, before the geopolitical split that divided them further, they had played a World Cup qualifier. Turkey won 7-0.

Huge cheering crowds were at the airport to welcome the visitors. Even though Aleppo had once been woven into the communities and economies of southern Turkey, the divisions had hardened since the Assad takeover in 1970. The countries had been close to war in the 1990s when Ankara had been enraged by support from Damascus for the Kurdish independence movement, the PKK. It was only the emergence of Erdogan and his new approach to foreign policy that allowed for progress in relations. Erdogan was the first Turkish leader who was probably happier dealing with the Arab world than Europe.

Syria waived visa requirements to allow Turks to attend the game and many Arabs living in southern Turkey took the opportunity to visit. Noisy celebrations among the crowd of 75,000 (and another 10,000 who gathered outside the stadium) delayed the start of the match. It was supposed to start at 7.30 but didn't get going until after 10.30 pm.

The Assads cut a strikingly different image from the Erdogans at the game. British-born Asma al-Assad was dressed in a stylish (and probably foreign-made) white coat while Erdogan's wife Emine, also a Sunni Arab, wore the hijab and a loose dark coat, befitting the spouse of an Islamist leader. For the

almost entirely male working class crowd in conservative Aleppo, she was probably more relatable. The two leaders had let it be known that they were personally close. Bashar overlooked the unfortunate misspelling of his name as Basher on the Fenerbahce shirt he was given and the two couples managed to look engaged and smiling when the television cameras caught them in the VIP box.

The match ended in a 2-2 draw, a diplomatically perfect result for two neighbors who were yet to master true friendship.

The positive mood would not last for long. By 2011, relations had soured to the point where Erdogan was backing those seeking to overthrow Assad and would describe him as “a more advanced terrorist than Daesh [ISIS].”¹⁶ Turkey was one of the key supporters of the Islamist groups fighting Assad. In turn Assad had allied again with the Kurdish groups that were Ankara’s implacable enemies.

Even the stadium had a temporary, Potemkin quality to it. At the time of the inaugural match, the mayor of Aleppo had boasted in the government newspaper Tishreen: “The stadium is built on the latest architectural plans and solutions. It has been done with local efforts. The follow-up of President Assad was the main reason behind this achievement, this accomplishment proves that Syria symbolizes construction and development, peace and culture.” The Polish designers and the two-decade delay were not mentioned. In 2009, the same newspaper lambasted the mayor for delays in renovations to the stadium. They had started fixing it just a year after it had opened and by 2009 it needed several million dollars of repairs.

Will football ever bring us together again in Syria? It has been popular to look to sports to provide some magic force for reconciliation, be it Ping Pong Diplomacy between the US and China in the 1970s, Korean teams marching together at the opening of the Sydney Olympics in 2000 or Nelson Mandela wearing a Springboks jersey at the final of the Rugby World Cup. Wonderful moments but not always enduring in their impact. Historically football clubs in Syria have had geographical identities rather than sectarian support. Al-Jaish, the military club that is home to many of the national players, was an exception. But will those identities survive the divisions that have been torn open by war? Has soccer in Syria, with its military and interior ministry sponsored teams, become too much of a mirror of the regime to ever return to national favor?

For every example of reconciliation through sports, there is an example of violence and ultra-nationalism. At the Euro 16 Cup, England fans chanted lines in mock support of ISIS to rile up their French hosts, recent victims of terrorism. Russian fans, as ominously organized as the Little Green Men who invaded Ukraine, fired flares at rivals across the stands. So anxious was Germany about a surge of toxic nationalism when it hosted the 2006 World Cup that it spent 30 million euros educating fans on how to behave. The oldest, and perhaps deepest, political and ethnic rivalry in football is between Rangers and Celtic fans in Glasgow. Rangers see themselves as native-born, Protestant, conservative and proudly

subjects of the United Kingdom. Celtic fans are Irish, Catholic, left-wing and Republican. The hatred between fans runs so deep that matches can seem like matters of life and death.

In Lebanon it is not just two teams who represent confessional divisions but all of them. Each of the 12 Premier League clubs have a clear sectarian and political identification, although hiring players is still a matter of talent rather than religion. Lebanese politics has been rigidly fixed to minimize the deadly competition that caused decades of civil war. Instead of war, there is now sports. In no other field of Lebanese life is religious and political competition allowed such full expression. Teams are almost entirely dependent on their political patrons, a situation made worse when violence at games led them to be played without spectators. The lack of atmosphere created by playing in empty arenas reduced payments for television rights making the teams even more dependent on rich political backers. Neutral sponsors are rare – unless you are willing to fund a Shia, a Sunni and a Christian team, your company would be perceived as taking sides. The power of political patrons is evident everywhere – teams play in the colors of their political backers, display vast posters of politicians and even name their stadiums after them. “The professional sports sector not only reflects sectarianism in Lebanon, it is also the sector contributing the most to manifest it,” wrote Danyel Reiche, a political scientist at the American University of Beirut.¹⁷

Is that the future of Syrian soccer? Crony-owned teams played in empty stadiums while the fans seethe at home? Footballers meekly following the orders of their political masters who loudly proclaim that politics must be kept out of sport. Or will soccer continue its tradition of resistance? That goes back to the Aztecs when a player is said to have decided it was time to drop the rule that losers were sacrificed to the Gods. When Federation Football was organized in Britain in the 19th century, it started off as a way for churches and factory owners to organize and control young men but it soon became a forum for revolutionary thoughts and gestures. In a world of oligarch-owned teams and multimillionaire teenage stars, we’ve forgotten the power football has had.

In 1998, Iran beat Australia on away goals to win a place in the World Cup in France. Tens of thousands of people poured on to the streets of Iranian cities, taking the opportunity of the massive celebrations to throw in some chants of “Death to the Mullahs!” Women shed their veils for a moment and crowds danced on the roofs of cars filled with scowling religious police. Football, like most things, can be used by authoritarians and against them. From the Christmas games between Belgian, German and British soldiers at Ypres in 1914 to the league that sustained those jailed on Robbin Island for fighting apartheid in South Africa, football has balanced its reputation for corruption, nationalism, and hooliganism with moments of astonishing brightness. What else brings more joy to more people?

Is the future of Syrian soccer Mohammed Jaddou? Now living in the southern German town of Oberstaufen, he’s become a local star, training with F.V. Ravensburg. Jaddou captained the Under-16 team that reached the Asian Football Confederation semis in Bangkok, emerging not just as one of the most

talented footballers in Syria but anywhere in the Middle East. That was enough to send the Syrian team to the FIFA Under-17 World Cup in Chile but Jaddou was not part of that match. By then he had joined hundreds of thousands of other Syrians on the dangerous trail to Europe, travelling with his father and uncle but leaving his mother and two brothers behind in Latakia.

As with Jaddou, the value of Syrians is now greater outside the country than in, in almost all ways. Jaddou now aspires to play for Real Madrid and to become one of the great players, something that would be unlikely if he had stayed at home. One of the greatest success stories of Syrian football is not in Syria but in Sweden. Assyriska, a club founded by Assyrian and Syrian migrants in the industrial city of Sodertalje, plays in the country's premier division, Allsvenskan.¹⁸ The history of Swedish football and Assyriska mirrors the country's history of immigration. The sport arrived from England and Denmark in the 19th century and the top clubs imported many of their players. Gotenburg was renowned for its success and its heavily Scottish team. But with the founding of the Allsvenskan in 1924, the country banned foreigners from playing for premier league clubs, a restriction that persisted in varying forms until 1979.

Assyrians, loosely defined as those who belong to the East Assyrian Church, began migrating to Sweden and Sodertalje in the 1960s, coming from Syria, Turkey, Lebanon and Iraq. Syrians, mostly belonging to the Syrian Orthodox Church, also moved to the city south of Stockholm that is known as the base for Scania trucks and AstraZeneca, the pharmaceutical giant. In 1974, a group of players founded Assyriska and three years later their local rivals Syrianska opened up shop. The two clubs are passionate rivals with some of the politics of ethno-religious identity spilling over to the pitch. Their relationship with their home city has been complex as well, with the clubs accusing local officials and businesses of racism because of their refusal to sponsor the team. Immigrant clubs were long regarded in Sweden as rowdy and prone to hooliganism, a view that has not faded despite Assyriska's emergence as a top level team. Syrian sportsmen may never be fully accepted in their places of refuge. Football is global and all the big European leagues are dominated now by players born outside the countries where they now play. But the lingering suspicions around Assyriska and Syrianska have not faded even as the teams have become mainstream successes.

The choices are stark for Syrians. Stay and risk death or go and hope, often against hope, you can find some sort of future. For Abdul Mohsen, the refugee famously tripped by the ultra-right Hungarian Hir TV camera operator while carrying a child across the Serbian border, football came to his rescue with a Spanish training center offering him a job as a coach. But football did not save Jihad Kassab, the former captain of al-Karamah in Homs and once one of the city's most popular sportsmen. The 40-year-old father of four was executed in a government prison on 16th September 2016 after being arrested two years ago.

ENDNOTES

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