

'Biladi, Biladi': Ethnic and Nationalistic Conflict in the Soccer Stadium in Israel

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This article examines two soccer-related encounters between the supporters of an Arab club in Israel, Hapoel Taibe, and two Jewish clubs that have a hard core of fanatical fans, highly hostile to Arabs in Israel. It is suggested that inter-ethnic relationships between minority and majority groups are underpinned by dependency relations; thus, collective identity is not determined independently, but is situational. Hence, it is assumed that the behaviour of the Arab spectators at their club games is only relatively autonomous in that it is influenced and shaped by the actions of the Jewish crowd. The encounters between the supporters reveal the problems of self-identification for the Arab fans. This article argues that the options of being a soccer fan, that is, being – at least in the soccer stadium – just an Israeli citizen (specified by ethnic factor), or of being part of an Arab collective (specified by nationalistic factor), are forced on them by the hardcore Jewish fans.

Ethnicity as a Signified Factor

The 'ethnic question', as it is referred to in the relevant literature, is at the centre of an ongoing debate. One of the most prominent arguments refers to the concrete autonomy of the ethnicity, vis-à-vis its association with other social categories, such as class or nationality. This argument is used here as a point of departure in order to deal with the (self) identification of Arab soccer fans during encounters with hostile Jewish crowds. The first part of this article offers a brief conceptual discussion of ethnicity as an ongoing state of negotiation about boundaries. The second part presents the socio-political position(s) of the Arab minority in Israel. The third part reviews some prominent cases involving ethnicity and soccer, while in the fourth, two encounters between Arab and Jewish fans are recounted and discussed in terms of the question of 'ethnic-cum-nationalistic' identification, in a state where citizenship and nationality(ies) do not converge.

The point of departure of this article is the concept of ethnicity accompanied by, and/or associated with, the concept of nationality. Although 'ethnicity' and 'nationality' assume different conceptual positions, they are sometimes treated here as interchangeable. Moreover, it is argued here that, in practice, the concept of ethnicity may either be correlated with, or embodied in, the concept of nationality; certain collective behaviour should be treated as 'ethnicity-cum-nationality'. This is demonstrated in the section that deals with the Arabs in Israel and that which describes the Arab fans' behaviour during the confrontations with the hostile Jewish crowd.

Barth¹ argues that the entire debate on ethnicity is epitomized by the demarcation of inter-ethnic borders or, more concretely, by an ongoing struggle between at least two ethnic groups to specify their 'social territory', i.e. to maintain their social institutions and the (relative) autonomy of their culture and identification. Jenkins² elaborates on this discussion and claims that central to Barth's analysis is a two-way process that takes place across the boundary between 'us' and 'them'.

For the purpose of this article, it is necessary to clarify a number of issues concerning ethnicity. First, it is quite reasonable to suggest that the struggle on ethnic boundaries may, in a certain historical context – such as where two (or more) ethnic groups consider themselves as related to different nationalities – be intertwined with elements of nationality, extending the above boundaries, while blurring the distinctions between ethnicity and nationality.

Second, it should be re-emphasized that ethnicity exists in a state of competition. This is an essential element in any definition of ethnicity. In practice, this competition occurs between definite ethnic categories over issues such as neighbourhoods, economic resources and, no less importantly, hegemony in the political and cultural orders. Competition, it should be added, may take several modes, from an ordered and consensual mode to an open conflictual mode.

Hence and third, the meaning of inter-ethnic relationships is made concrete by 'dependency relations', behind which lurks a tension that is a constant potential for conflict. In a historical situation in which an ethnic majority and minority coexist, the dependency relations revolve around what Raymond Williams specifies as 'hegemony', which means that the inter-ethnic relations centre on a constant process of consensus-construction by compliance or exploitation.³

The fourth argument is that inter-ethnic boundaries, which specify the ethnic group as an *in sich* ('in itself') Marxist category, tend to be 'sealed' when they are accompanied by an intensified ethnic identification, i.e. when the ethnic group becomes a *für sich* ('for itself') Marxist category.⁴ This 'thick' mode of collective identification carries a whole set of symbols, signs and practices. Since, as Jarvie⁵ has noted, collective identification is based on 'shared collective experience', it is anticipated that the collective – i.e. the ethnic group – keeps a kind of 'response-set' of practices which its members use in definite situations/confrontations, in order to specify their particular base of identification.

To be a Minority; to be an Arab

The Arabs in Israel are a minority group, although a significant one. In 1996/7, they constituted about 19 per cent of the entire population of Israel with 75 per cent of them being Muslims and the rest Christians, Druse and others. Within the legal boundaries of Israel, which exclude the occupied territories, the Arabs of

Israel are a minority. Yet, according to an alternative conception, they constitute a portion of a wider national reference group as a collective entity, that is, the Palestinian people, which (including their Diaspora) is about 4.7 million strong. Actually, most of the Palestinian people reside very close to the Arabs of Israel, in the occupied territories and in the newly created Palestinian entity. Similarly, it is evident that almost all the Jews in Israel consider themselves to be part of the Jewish people, which numbers some 13.5 million worldwide. It should be noted that neither side is fully homogeneous and it is possible to detect variety within the Jews and Arabs in Israel. However, based on various public opinion surveys and the political map in Israel, one can nevertheless conclude that the relationships between the Jews and the Arabs in Israel are related to – and even dependent on – such wider circles of reference. The Jews in Israel tend to consider themselves as related to the Jewish People (nation) in and outside Israel. The Arabs consider themselves to be related to the entire Palestinian people (not to mention the even wider circle of the ‘Arab nations’) and many even look at themselves as Palestinian–Israelis. It is worth noting here that the national factor fulfils an important role in Israeli society. Israel is considered by the Jewish majority, as ‘the State of the Jewish People’ – implying all the Jews in the world and not just those who live in Israel. This assertion is backed by the law. Hence, it is quite impossible to comprehend Jewish–Arab relations solely in terms of the ethnic factor.

The wider reference group of the Arabs of Israel enables them to feel like an ‘imagined majority’. Actually, this is not so imagined because, in the Middle East, Arabs are certainly the majority.⁶ But, as a minority in Israel, the position of the Arabs is unique, though it is not exclusive. In Israel, they are a minority compared to the Jews, who, in turn, are a minority in comparison to Arabs in the Middle East. This imagined and not so imagined complement of reference groups affects the political perception of the Arabs in Israel, as reflected in the following lines by an Arab poet:

We are minority?/No no!/A million times no!!/because here we are the majority⁷

Clearly, the political conceptions of Arabs and Jews in Israel are based on ‘ethnicity–cum–nationality’, though the national tends to overshadow the ethnic factor.

In the politics of identity, so prominent in Israel because of the dominant position of Zionism and (Jewish) nationality, the ‘imagined’ reference group tends to coincide with the concrete, belonging group. Thus, the concept of an Israeli Jew and the concept of an Israeli Arab (or Palestinian Arab) are, in fact, two parallel ways of formulating a national identity which crosses the Israeli state boundaries in practice.⁸ It becomes apparent that the concept and practice of identity of the Arabs in Israel is conditioned, to a large extent, on the response of the Jewish majority. This dependency is intensified by the almost absolute rule of

the state by the Jewish majority and the position of citizenship in Israel which is secondary to nationality; i.e. Jews enjoyed absolute priority in terms of immigration (the 'Law of Return' applies only to Jews), becoming a citizen and benefiting from state endowments.

The boundaries between Jews and Arabs in Israel are marked by a number of dividing factors: national origin, language, historical memories, and religion. These factors, in part or *in toto*, may set up a solid base for the formulation of two separate cultural-bounded autonomies. These boundaries also specify a particular territorial division within Israel.⁹ The latter is only partial, because some places, such as the cities of Lydda, Ramle, Haifa and Tel Aviv-Jaffa, have both Jewish and Arab residents. Thus, it is possible to state that the Arabs and the Jews constitute distinct national communities, with different practical affiliations to the state. Furthermore, neither side wants anything like a complete dismantling of the inter-ethnic/nationality boundaries.

Looking at the ongoing situation in Israel, it appears that the most effective definition of the relationships between the Arab minority and the Jewish majority, is that of 'dependency relations', primarily dependency of the minority. These asymmetric relations are reproduced by the state, which, as mentioned, is essentially ruled by the Jews. The ongoing dependency relations effectively determine the reproduction of inter-ethnic boundaries and, consequently, the content and form of each side's sense of identification. However, although the Arabs constitute the dependent minority, they do influence the behaviour of the Jewish majority. Relative autonomy is still a key concept in comprehending the relationships between minority and majority in Israel.

Both sides share a historical memory regarding the beginning of modern Jewish colonization in Palestine (1882) and the period of British Mandate (1917-48). Each side interprets this past on its own terms and in the light of present political necessities. The Arabs remember the days when they constituted the majority in Palestine, a reality that was shattered by the outcome of the War of 1948.

The Jews' memory of the same days is different. At present, both sides are citizens of the same state, but rely on different imagined communities. The Arabs' imagined community includes the 'Palestinians'. However, it appears that the Arab minority in Israel has adopted a practical approach, reducing the 'diameter' of the 'imagined':

Yes, it is correct, I say this too. When we have a state (a Palestinian state), ... I live here, I shall not leave home. What is a state for me? This is the food I eat, these are the friends I talk to... If there is a Palestinian state by the side of the Israeli state... why should I worry about it?¹⁰

Regarding the political arena, it is suggested by a few authors that Israel is an 'ethnic democracy'.¹¹ That is, Arabs *as individuals* are endowed with civil and political rights on equal terms with the Jews. However, the policy of the state

regarding their position as a *collective entity*, is hesitant and restrictive. In fact, for political (Zionist) reasons, the Jewish majority specifies the ethnocentric characteristics of the state and is responsible for the constant reproduction of the inter-ethnic boundaries and of its hegemony in every sphere of society.¹² However, the Arab conservative-Islamic groups in Israel are keen to co-operate in this reproduction – seclusion is very much in their interest too.

This, in brief, is the background which imposes certain options on the Arab minority in Israel to create their imagined community, without really departing from their generations-old dwelling place:

The Arabs in Israel do not observe any contradiction between their Palestinization after 1967 and their Israelization after 1948. ... They accept their fate as Israeli citizens. They see their future in Israel and hope that their problematic position would be solved within the frame of the state of Israel and not by separation from this state... there is no contradiction between Palestinian nationality and Israeli citizenship... 60.2% of the Arabs in a poll that took place in 1995, thought that an integration of Palestinian-Israeli identity suits them.¹³

Nevertheless, even by adopting a pragmatic approach, there is a kind of 'dialectical index' underlying the relationships between the Jews and the Arabs in Israel. Hence, power and tension prescribe the concrete relationships between the two communities. Even in certain domains in which the participation of Arabs does not depend on collective concessions, but on individual achievement and merit, inter-ethnic demarcations and restrictions are in effect. The policies and *raison d'être* of the Jewish-Zionist state make it difficult – even impossible – for the Arabs to become totally devoted Israeli citizens.¹⁴

In fact, the position of Arabs in Israel is contingent on the state which is totally controlled by the Jewish majority: the state runs special instruments to supervise and control the Arabs. These measures include special Jewish settlements (called *Mitzpim* – 'watch towers') erected within certain Arab regions in the country, controlling land purchase, nominating a (Jewish) Minister for Arab issues, and utilizing state budget allocations as a means of reward/restriction. In fact, Arabs in Israel are primarily treated as an ethnic collective by the state and by the Jewish majority, whether they, the Arabs, like it or not. The fate of the individual Arab is highly restricted.

The concrete ordeal of identification may occur in different arenas in Israel, in which Arabs meet (or encounter) Jews both as individuals and as collectives. The soccer stadium may serve as an immediate test case for the question of identity and the apparently 'ritualized observance' may, under certain conditions, reflect the multi-faceted nature of identity in the region – is it that of 'Israeli Arabs', 'Arabs in Israel', 'Palestinian-Israeli Arabs' or something else?

Ethnicity and Soccer

Sport is considered by many authors to be an arena of inter-cultural struggle – even as a mechanism of sublimation of real war. Sports competition opposes ‘us’ to ‘them’ and participates in the reproduction of boundary demarcations on the basis of factors such as inter-ethnicity, religion or nationality. In short, sports competition reinforces particular collective identities.¹⁵

Soccer is considered to be the most popular spectator sport in the world and it incorporates some characteristics that can be used for purposes other than mere sport,¹⁶ such as, maintaining/reproducing ethnic-national identification within a society in which ethnicity, nationalism and citizenship do not fully converge.

Two contradictory key assumptions emerge from the relevant literature. One relates to adaptation and assimilation. The second relates to protest and conflict. Some writers (see below) consider the correlation between soccer and ethnicity as instrumental for the adjustment and assimilation of ethnic groups, or other groups in the social structure. Others argue that this correlation leads to protest, conflict and sometimes to disintegration.

According to the first assumption, ethnic minorities are highly willing to integrate by adopting the society’s values and certain practices which symbolize nativity.¹⁷ Hence, in the USA for example, the game of baseball has been adopted by immigrants because, in that country, this sport is valued as an important cultural symbol. Baseball was, and probably still is, the quintessential ‘American’ game. The assimilation-adaptation assumption allows for both the togetherness and the aloneness. By participating in (and even proving their excellence at) certain games, immigrants are integrated into the native-majority-culture. Yet, by establishing ethnic-based clubs, they sustain their relative autonomy, that is, they maintain their particularity by adding another ‘ethnic border sign’. This is made possible, either by the creation of a separate sports league for clubs ‘of their own kind’, or by maintaining ethnic-based clubs which participate in the regular state leagues.

The advocates of adaptation and assimilation argue that modern-capitalist sport will eventually lead to the blurring of ethnic boundaries, and hence will be an accelerator for assimilation. This argument derives from ‘the logic of the free market’: at a certain stage of the commodification of sport, the best players of ethnic clubs will be purchased by leading, majority-owned clubs. While ethnic borders are obstacles, commodification motivates the inter-ethnic mobility of players and blurs – though it does not eliminate – ethnic boundaries in practice.¹⁸

On the soccer field, the ‘old firm’ in Glasgow, Scotland, Rangers and Celtic are used by advocates of the assimilation assumption to support their argument. The authors reading of Finn’s work is that it demonstrates,¹⁹ quite decisively, that the erection of Irish-Catholic-Scottish soccer clubs at the end of the nineteenth century (Glasgow Celtic, Edinburgh Hibernian and Dundee Harp [now Dundee United]), expressed the sincere will of the Catholic community in the southern

areas of the country – a community largely composed of Irish émigrés, to participate in Scottish sport and, by that means, to integrate into the entire society. The ethnic soccer club was an effective way for such immigrants to participate in sport – and, through this, to integrate in a state that was ruled by the Protestant majority – while maintaining their identity: ‘To a particular group, Celtic F.C. is an important badge of identity, a concrete element that helps to create and to bridge a sense of difference.’²⁰

Practically, ethnic-based clubs do not just express a quest for identity, but also a quest for equal opportunities. In modern times, European immigrants to Australia have found soccer very instrumental in creating a place in which they can compete against the locals, that is, the dominant majority, on equal terms²¹ Guttman points to a similar function which soccer performed for the British working class, who drew on the game to confront the hegemony of the old order and also the rising bourgeoisie-capitalist class in the second half of the nineteenth century.²² Soccer has also shaped social identities in other countries, such as Argentina, where it has functioned as a bridge between the different (ethnic) communities. As Archetti points out: ‘Soccer, then, created a space for male self definition, and a historical time for producing and “representing” events, games and players tied to the imagining of “Argentine Qualities”.’²³

The second assumption relates to protest and conflict. Soccer is considered as instrumental for protest and for maintaining a particular (ethnic) identity. Thus, ethnic-based soccer clubs are an effective means for maintaining a voluntary seclusion which keeps the ethnic group together. It is also instrumental against the majority and against ‘its’ state. However, ethnic-based clubs may also be instrumental for the ruling majority, which uses these clubs to substantiate its domination and even to demarcate and/or to exclude the minority. Hence, Glasgow Rangers represents the Protestant majority in Scotland. The supporters of Rangers voice their opposition to the Celtic fans, many of whom demonstrate their clannish sympathy for the Catholics in Northern Ireland.²⁴ The Protestants in Scotland argue that Celtic fans are participating in an act of sectarianism.²⁵ Thus, they claim, it is in fact the minority which dissociates itself from the state.

The phenomenon of the ethnic-based soccer club is worldwide.²⁶ It should be comprehended by a ‘symptomatic reading’: such clubs represent something profound in the social system – related, perhaps, to the class structure, to an ethnic division of labour, minority oppression and so forth. It is possible to suggest that ethnic-based soccer clubs are a symptom of such a cultural or political division of labour. This division reproduces the inter-ethnic boundaries; different social identities are formulated and reproduced on the opposite sides of these boundaries.

The above brief discussion of the two seemingly opposed assumptions leads to the conclusion that the choice of one assumption over the other is problematic. The data do not seem to support a priori one or the other of the above assumptions: sometimes, by using the same story, it is possible to come to

different and even contrasting conclusions. It is therefore crucial to consider the specific context (e.g. the socio-political context) which prescribes critical 'degrees of freedom' for sport and, in particular, for soccer. Assimilation and/or protest is/are therefore contingent on the particular social-history of the studied society.²⁷

Methodology

This article is based on a study of the soccer club, Hapoel Taibe, carried out during the 1996/97 soccer season, when the team was playing in the Israeli first division, the 'national league'. The author joined the team before the start of the season and was present at almost every game during the league programme, as well as at weekly training and at the training camp which took place during the seasonal winter break. The basic methodology of this research was 'participant observation' – a notebook and tape-recorder were used constantly. Some other instruments were also used: research assistants conducted interviews with all the players, Arabs, Jews and foreigners. The author conducted long interviews with the managers of the team, with the coaches, with journalists who were familiar with the team's history. Articles in the newspapers dealing with Hapoel Taibe during the 1996/97 season were collected on a weekly basis and analysed. Articles and news about Hapoel Taibe from the start of the 1960s were also collated and analysed.

Using a questionnaire, research assistants interviewed 48 of the inhabitants of the town of Taibe (men, women, young and old) who were selected from the register of Taibe residents. In a few selected games – such as that in the first encounter described below, a research assistant was sitting among the fans of the rival team, taking notes of their behaviour, while the author of this article was with the Taibe team and supporters.

In terms of the ethnic composition of the club during the 1996/97 season, the management included only male Arabs whilst the playing staff consisted mainly of Arab players, mostly from the Arab town of Taibe and its environs, who had played with the team in the second division and had earned promotion. The club was thus ethnic-based (or nationality-based). The team also included Jewish players who joined at the beginning of, and during, the season and foreign players (only three foreigners were allowed in each team in the first division – the 'National' League). The first coach – who was dismissed towards the end of the first half of the season – was also a foreigner, from Poland, who had previously acted as the coach of the Polish National Team for a period.

Owing to the lack of certain facilities, the home stadium of Hapoel Taibe was disqualified by the Israeli Football Association. Taibe had to play its 'home' games at a better equipped stadium in a nearby 'Jewish' town. Training sessions during the week were also conducted outside Taibe, at an available playing field.

During this season, Hapoel Taibe was supported by a relatively large crowd of Arabs from the town itself, and also by many Arabs from other places around the country. 'Taibe' said many interviewees, 'represents the Arabs in Israel'. The mayor of Taibe, Rafik Haj-Yichye, who was also acting as the team chairman, called it 'the team of all the Arabs', using a formal expression in Arabic. In general terms, most of the individuals interviewed (except for a few radical Muslims) said that the team is important to them and influences their daily mood. 'When the team loses a game, I feel depressed,' commented one interviewee.

Hapoel Taibe was the first Arab team ever to play in the 'premier' division of the National league. The Taibe crowd was very similar to any standard crowd in Israel, but it had one conspicuous aspect – it consisted primarily of Arabs, with only a very few Jewish supporters. Also, this crowd was exclusively male (other teams in the first division have a small core of female supporters).

Considering the Jewish–Arab relations in Israel, and also the relations between the Israeli state and the newly established Palestinian authority in Gaza and the West Bank (which established their own soccer league, irrelevant, however, to the topic of this article), the meeting between the Taibe fans and those of other clubs was a potential cause for an inter-ethnic – essentially nationalist – confrontation. The reasons for this potential confrontation were not born on the soccer field, but were imported. Yet, the potential conflict became a real confrontation at certain games when a certain class of Jewish crowd was present.

During the season, Hapoel Taibe played 30 games. Half of these games were considered home games. In almost every spectator sport, away games are considered more difficult: people – including journalists, players, etc. – believe that the probability of a win in a home-game is much higher than for an away game. It is almost axiomatic that the local supporters are in the majority, and they see themselves as actively aiding their team to win, by spurring them on and also by upsetting the composure of the opponents. This takes on a different shape and content when the soccer stadium is (also) a meeting ground of two potentially hostile ethnic crowds.

Before discussing the findings of this article, which are presented below in the form of narratives, two observations are worthy of mention. First, based on the interviews and occasional conversations, it appears that the management of the Hapoel Taibe was in an awkward situation. On the one hand, they wished to maintain the team as representative 'of all the Arabs', and thus needed to underline the ethnic identity of the team. On the other hand, they wished the team to be considered by other teams and their fans as any other 'normal' football team playing in the Israeli league. Thus, the management tended to describe the team to the general public and the fans as 'just a regular football team'. This was the message which was delivered to the fans. Second, during almost every match the team's supporters were split into two sections: a hard core of active supporters – about a third of the crowd – who chanted their support of the team and

expressed their opposition to the rival team, and sometimes even assaulted the management and players following poor performances on the field of play. They were the first to respond to abuse by the rival crowd. These fans were mostly young people from the town of Taibe. The rest of the crowd, mainly adults, was less active, but at certain times – as in the following two accounts – even they became quite aggressive.

Two Accounts

The following is a description and interpretation of two encounters – first, between the Taibe supporters and those of Betar Jerusalem, and second, between the Taibe supporters and those of Bnei-Yehuda Tel-Aviv. The supporters of these two teams (although not all of them) have a reputation of being aggressive and opposed to Arabs in general. They are also characterized by their ethnic origin, mainly from Asia or North Africa, and by their class position, mainly lower middle and working class. Many of the above two clubs' supporters reside in the poor neighbourhoods in which the teams originated and many of them also sympathize with the right-wing 'Likud' party, which was the major party of the government coalition at that time.

The meetings between the fans of Hapoel Taibe and those of Betar and Bnei-Yehuda, turned immediately into confrontations – much more than is usual in matches in Israel between two rival teams. These confrontations were bellicose, vociferous, and ugly, and eventually turned into a confrontation at the national level – Jews against Arabs.

The First Tale: Hapoel Taibe v. Betar Jerusalem

The first meeting (ever) of the two teams took place in a pre-season game in the 'Toto trophy competition', on 11 August 1996 in the 'Teddy Stadium' in Jerusalem. This was a historic meeting. The press and the TV channels had already discussed the prospect of the Taibe–Betar clash four months earlier, when Hapoel Taibe finally gained promotion to the first division. Before this particular game, supporters from both sides were interviewed and the pre-game atmosphere indicated that this was going to be a test of the relationships between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Betar Jerusalem, which is formally related to the Likud, is a very popular team in Israel. Its supporters are spread all over Israel (a few are even Arabs). The majority of hard core fans are from lower socio-economic Jerusalem neighbourhoods. Usually, at a league game (league games are played on Saturdays, the Sabbath) the stadium in Jerusalem has a full house of about 15,000 spectators. In Israel, outside of important international matches, this is considered a huge attendance. Only a couple of other teams have such a big crowd of supporters who actively come to the stadium to watch their team playing. In fact, a crowd of over 10,000 spectators is quite exceptional in Israeli league games.

With some reservations, it is appropriate to describe the supporters of Betar Jerusalem as lower-middle class and working class, 'Mizrachim', male, and literally 'fanatic'. The Betar crowd (though made up of different people at different times), has had a reputed history of violent behaviour at matches. As noted, this crowd is also largely right-wing and also – though not necessarily consequently – antagonistic to Arabs in general, including the Israeli Arabs.

The management of both sides made an effort to ease the obvious tension which was almost palpable. However, the Betar crowd (a few thousand, quite a big crowd, considering that this was not a regular league game) had a different agenda: 'I came to this game,' said someone to the press, 'to support the Jews against the Arabs' (newspaper *Ma'ariv*, 3 Nov. 1996). Immediately and even before the referee's first whistle, the Taibe crowd was welcomed by orchestrated screams of, 'Death to the Arabs'. The mayor of Taibe, Rafik Haj-Yichye, who came to every game, was showered by missiles and by shouts of 'terrorist', which was an effort to relate him to the Islamic 'Hammas' terrorist group. The depth of the antagonism directed at Haj-Yichye necessitated a police escort to his seat in the stadium.

The Taibe fans, numbering a few hundred, who had already had some previous experience of anti-Arab chanting while in the second division, did not respond on the same nationalistic level. Their standard reaction, directed against the Betar supporters, was to use simple profanity – the Arabic equivalents of 'fuck Betar' and 'screw yourselves'. Practically, the game had two different scenarios: one that took place on the pitch and one that took place on the terraces. Before the start of the game, the players of Betar Jerusalem welcomed Hapoel Taibe players with flowers. Following a traditional custom, the latter threw flowers to the bleachers where the Taibe crowd was sitting. However, in an angry response to the behaviour of the Betar crowd, the flowers were thrown back on the field. The daily newspaper *Ma'ariv* of 11 August 1996 reported that:

the meeting between Betar Jerusalem and Hapoel Taibe was potentially explosive. The police were ready, and the Taibe fans were separated from the Betar fans,...the police force constituted a buffer between the two camps...while the game was on, the Betar fans threw bottles at the Taibe players.

The game ended in a goalless draw. During the match there was large police presence in the stadium to prevent physical contact between the two crowds, and after the game the Taibe fans were escorted by the police to their transport. For Hapoel Taibe, this result in an away game, particularly against 'The' Betar Jerusalem, was considered a big success – a real boost to their ego, both as Taibe fans and also as Arabs. Betar at that time was one of the top teams in the country. The Betar fans were highly disappointed and humiliated – the 'Jews' had failed against the 'Arabs'. For this crowd (though not everyone), the fact that some players on the Taibe team were not Arabs at all, but Jews and foreigners, meant

nothing as all were branded 'traitors' and 'terrorists'. The supporters of Taibe realized that the boundary erected by the Betar fans specified two contrasting imagined communities: 'We the Jews, the loyal citizens, versus they/you the Arabs, the illegitimate citizens.'

This was quite hard for the Taibe supporters. They could not respond in the same manner as the Betar crowd, that is, by abusing the Jews as a category, because of the presence of Jewish players in their team. The Jewish players (as told to the author) were mortified. For them it was a new situation; they had never before played in an Arab team, though some had played for Jewish teams which included Arab players. Also, at that stage, the Taibe fans refrained from publicly associating or identifying Hapoel Taibe with the Arab minority in Israel. The overt policy of the management – which they transmitted to the supporters – was to emphasize the professional aspect, that is of a soccer team, and to ignore the ethnic nationality image. This proved to be a lost cause.

The Toto trophy competition is based on two matches, home and away. The second game was played on the 5 October, at Taibe's substitute home ground which happened to be the Kfar-Saba city stadium, about 20 miles from the city of Taibe. A relatively large crowd came from Jerusalem to support Betar, as well as a large crowd of Taibe supporters. The police were ready and dozens of officers, including mounted police, closely observed both sets of fans before, during, and after the game, both inside and outside the stadium. The two crowds were directed to separate stands and every spectator was searched thoroughly. About 20 minutes before kick off, the Betar crowd started screaming 'Death to the Arabs', 'Terrorists', 'Go to Gaza' and 'Baruch Goldstein' (the Jewish settler who, in March 1994, opened fire on Muslim worshippers in the Tomb of the Patriarchs Mosque in Hebron, killing 23, before he was himself killed). The Taibe crowd was restrained and hesitant. Some, mainly young people, did try to shout 'Death to the Jews' but were immediately hushed by their neighbours. The Betar crowd shifted into 'Mohammed (the founder of Islam) son of a bitch' and the Taibe crowd responded with 'Bibi [nickname of prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu] son of a bitch.' This game ended with Betaras the 1–0 victors. At the end of the game the police escorted the Betar supporters to their vehicles and managed to stop a few skirmishes between small hostile groups. Owing to the effective behaviour of the police, there were no injuries or arrests.

In the aftermath of the second encounter between the crowds, it became clear to the Taibe supporters that, whether they wanted it or not, their identity as just another group of soccer supporters was an illusion – at least vis-à-vis the Betar crowd. In practical terms, these two meetings turned into confrontation between Jews and Arabs. The next meeting was due to be a league match. Compared to the Toto trophy games, league matches are more prestigious and the results much more important to the teams. For instance, a high finish in the league championship secures participation in the following season's European

competitions organized by UEFA. The stage of the next meeting was set in Haifa city stadium, where both teams met for that first ever league game.

The game took place on 1 November 1996. Betar Jerusalem had already shown itself to be one of the best teams in Israel of that season, a front runner for the championship, with 17 league points (out of a maximum 24 at that time). Taibe, a newcomer to the first division (the 'National League') – its first ever season in this league – had garnered just 9 points. This was Taibe's 'home game'. The Haifa stadium was selected as a surrogate home ground because the police identified its location and design as being more manageable than the Kfar Saba stadium. Yet, since the mainly Jewish city of Haifa still has a significant Arab population and is near a major Arab population centre, the Taibe supporters were hoping for a large 'home' support.

The confrontation between the clubs had begun several days before the game. Eli Cohen, the Betar coach, was quoted in the newspapers as saying to his team in the dressing room a few days before the game: 'This is a game between Jews and Arabs.' When this statement was leaked to the press the Chairman of Taibe, Abdul-Rachman Haj-Yichye, responded by saying; 'He – Eli Cohen – will go back home after the game with many goals between his goal posts...we shall meet on the field' (*Ma'ariv*, 28 Oct. 1996). This same week, the mayor of Taibe drove to Jerusalem, to meet the city's Mayor of Jerusalem, in order to ease the tension and to set up a positive atmosphere. However, in *Ma'ariv* (30 Oct. 1996), Eli Ohanna, the captain of Betar and a popular player in Israel, pointed an accusatory finger at those whom he considered the guilty party – 'a handful of inciters from Taibe and their mayor'. An atmosphere of hostility, based on ethnic and nationalistic terms, was thus built up before the game started.

The Taibe camp was optimistic, the team managers and hard core supporters told the author they believed that this time Taibe was going to win the game. The players and the Polish coach were more realistic than the management and the supporters. The coach made much effort to ignore the political tumult which was forced on the match. However, being familiar with the politics of Israel (he had already coached an Israeli team in 1989/90), he knew that this was almost impossible. After the game, some players actually complained that, because of the political atmosphere, they had felt responsible for the reputation of the entire Arab sector, as well as for Arab-Jewish relationships in Israel.

Fourteen thousand people came to the stadium in Haifa, about 60 per cent of whom were Arabs who came to support 'their' team. Listening to the ongoing discussions and interviewing people, it became quite obvious that this crowd considered Hapoel Taibe as representative of the entire Arab sector in Israel, and that the result of this game was highly important to them as a collective.

Both crowds arrived ready for a confrontation on the field and on the terraces. It seems clear (based on the records and field notes of the author taken before the game) that the Betar crowd adopted a more hostile attitude than the Taibe fans.

Yet, the latter were ready. They anticipated that they and their team would be subjected to ethnic-cum-national abuse and were prepared to respond.

Inside the stadium the opposing fans were strictly segregated. A relatively large force of policeman, and also dozens of security men and Border Police (soldiers who do their national service as special policemen), 500 security personnel in all, monitored the crowd. The Haifa police also set up a special headquarters for this specific game. As in the previous meeting between the two teams, every individual was searched by a policeman or policewoman, using metal-detectors and items such as fruit, bottles and other potential missiles were forbidden.

On the fences which separated the stands from the pitch, the Betar supporters hung out yellow and black flags (the colours of the team) and signboards with words in praise of Betar. The relatively poor results of their team in the Toto Trophy (only one goal scored in two games) were not forgotten. The Betar spectators not only came to see their team win, but one could clearly realize – by reading interviews in the newspapers, and taking notes of the conversations between the supporters at the gates and in the stands before the game, that they also came to see Hapoel Taibe – the ‘Arab’ team – lose. For the hard core fans, this was an encounter between Jews and Arabs, not just another soccer game. On Sunday (3 Nov. 96), two days after the game, *Ma'ariv* reported that:

Betar fans came singing, shouting and cursing, hanging on the fences that separate the stands from the field, arguing with and confronting (the police)... A big roughneck declared that he had come ‘to help the Jews’.

On the other side of the stadium, the Taibe supporters hung red flags and green pieces of cloth. Green is the official colour of Taibe uniforms but is also the colour of Islam, whereas red is the alternative team colour. In this game, Hapoel Taibe played in their alternative red strip. ‘Red’ is the colour of Hapoel Federation, the country-wide organization of which Taibe is a member. One could not mistake the underlying significance of the use of green and red banners (the colours of the Palestinian-Islamic people). However, no nationalistic chants were used before the game. A group of young people were very active, chanting songs in Hebrew and Arabic, encouraging their respective teams. The distance between the two crowds was about 80 metres. This did not prevent each side seeing, receiving, and interpreting the songs – in voice and body language – of the other. The message sent out by these chants was clear.

The dignitaries’ stand was packed. Present were the mayors of Haifa, Jerusalem, and Taibe and their entourages, as well as the deputy-minister of education and sport, the Speaker of the Knesset (the Israeli parliament), members of the Soccer Association, Yasser Arafat’s (the chairman of the Palestinian authority) special counsellor, Ahmad Tibi, reporters from every newspaper in Israel, the Israeli TV and radio, and TV crews from Spain and Switzerland. From the Betar stand, the mayor of Taibe was greeted with abusive

yells (aimed at his ethnic origin and his family). The Mayor of Haifa appealed to the spectators through a loudspeaker to behave sportingly during the coming game. However, the fans had their own agenda.

The teams stepped up onto the field. Both had something important to lose: Betar Jerusalem was fighting for the league championship, while Hapoel Taibe was struggling to survive in the first division. Yet, honour was also very important for both teams. The players were aware of the political implications of the game. So were the politicians who had come to watch it. In terms of a sporting fixture, everything was over in half-an-hour: a hat-trick (three goals) by the Betar midfielder, Stephan Sheloy, a foreign player, ended the competitive aspect of the game very early. However, nothing was over in the stands. After the two previous meetings, almost everything was ready for the confrontation.

The Taibe supporters identified their target. This was the Betar captain, Eli Ohanna, whom they considered to be a racist. Most of the curses were aimed at him. Bahagat Uoda, the Taibe defender who, during the game, had the task of marking Eli Ohanna, Betar's captain and leading goal-scorer, later complained that Ohanna had called him a 'stinking Arab'. Ohanna responded by claiming Uoda had called him a 'dirty Jew'. The verbal dual between the two during the game almost turned into physical confrontation on a number of occasions (*Ma'ariv*, 3 Nov. 1996).

Eli Cohen, the Betar coach, was also a prime target of abuse by the Taibe crowd. Nevertheless, at the very beginning of the game, the fans focused on supporting their team. They chanted 'Allah Is Great', and 'Taibe, Taibe'. The chanting and jumping up and down on the seats were initiated by a large group of young people. Older adults, with or without children, preferred the seating at the far end of the stand, although still within the boundaries of the Taibe supporters. Until the first goal, the Taibe supporters were hopeful, however, the first goal for Betar caused a shock of disappointment among the Taibe supporters and exhilarated their opponents who greeted their team's second and the third goals with loud chants of; 'Death to the Arabs'.

The Taibe supporters responded immediately with 'Bibi, son of a bitch'. Betar supporters were known for their fanatical support of the current prime minister of Israel. The counter response was framed in ethnic-nationalistic terms: 'Mohammed son of a bitch', 'Baruch Goldstein', 'Go to Gaza' (which meant 'you do not belong here'), etc.

At this point – while the match was still in progress – the two crowds transmogrified from regular spectators into definite national categories – Jews and Arabs. People in the Taibe crowd started to chant 'Biladi Biladi' (my homeland, my homeland) which is regarded as a Palestinian nationalistic song (originally, it was an Egyptian song). The Taibe supporters had undergone a transformation: now they were ready and willing to accept their definition as an Arab collective rather than mere supporters of a specific soccer club. The

underlying text was clear and post-game discussions with some of these spectators enabled the author to interpret this use of 'Biladi'. For these people to be an Arab in Israel meant attachment to the land – land which they regarded as having belonged to them for generations. The essence of Biladi was expressed by one supporter who exclaimed 'We are here by right... we belong here'. Based on interviews and discussions with Arab spectators, it is possible to suggest that Biladi signifies the prime element of identification of the Arab minority in Israel – as portrayed above. However, for sincere and practical reasons, expression of this element was normally suspended in the football stadium. As noted above, the management and the majority of the supporters made an effort to present Hapoel Taibe as a regular football team in the Israeli league.

The supposedly major event – the match – was made insignificant in the face of the erupting national collective identity (being Arab and not merely football spectators) which was practically forced on the Taibe crowd by the other side. In psychological terms, it may be said that this collective identity – expressed by the Biladi chant – helped to ease the pain of losing the game.

When the Betar crowd shouted 'Death to the Arabs', some people in the Taibe stands began shouting 'Death to the Jews'. Immediately, the ushers and other Taibe fans – mainly adults – told them to 'shut up' and not use such language. It is possible to interpret this gesture as an attempt to maintain the appearance of Hapoel Taibe as a normal football team, to prevent confrontation on an ethnic/nationalist base and also because of the participation of Jewish players in the Taibe team. A few Taibe fans made an attempt to break into the radio broadcasting studio in the stadium, because they thought the broadcaster had said that Taibe supporters were the first to begin with anti-Jewish abuse. The police intervened to calm down the heated situation.

During the game, the two crowds could not confront each other physically and instead had to rely on communicating their animosity verbally. However, after the game, outside the stadium, a few rival gangs incited clashes. Betar supporters baited and heckled Taibe fans. The newspapers reported that two Taibe fans tried, unsuccessfully, to stab two Betar fans (who wore yellow and black striped scarves). They were arrested by the police. Two other Taibe supporters were arrested. The windows of one car were smashed. But the police, with the assistance of the Border Police, were able to intervene and prevent any seriously violent confrontation between the two crowds.

It can thus be seen that, essentially, the script had been written before the game. The supporters of Taibe had very few options: the collective nationalistic identity was not created at the stadium in Haifa. In the eight league games that had preceded the match against Betar Jerusalem, everything had been reasonably normal. Nationalistic outbursts were not prominent, since the supporters of the other teams hardly resorted to such racial tactics. However, when the Betar crowd started the anti-Arab chanting, the deep, very basic primordial collective identity of a deprived minority was virtually forced to emerge. Faced by the insults of the

Betar fans, the Taibe supporters became an entity of the 'Arab minority in Israel', in their own Biladi.

The Second Tale

Hapoel Taibe v. Bnei-Yehuda Tel-Aviv

Two weeks after the game against Betar Jerusalem, on 17 November, Hapoel Taibe was scheduled to play against Bnei-Yehuda, in Tel-Aviv. A week before this game, the Israeli national team had lost in an away game to the national team of Cyprus, 2–0, in the 1998 World Cup preliminary competition. This was a painful blow to the Israeli national team, because the Cypriot team was considered a weak competitor, and an Israeli victory was both expected and a necessary stepping stone for the team to advance to the World Cup finals. In that particular game, no Arab player was on the team. Very often, the Israeli national team includes Arab players – there are two on the 1999/00 national squad. The function which this blow fulfilled concerning the Taibe v. Bnei-Yehuda match, was, as elaborated below, highly significant.

In the 1996/97 season, Bnei-Yehuda was a small but veteran club in one of the less prosperous neighbourhoods in Tel-Aviv. The club's supporters have very similar demographic characteristics to those of Betar Jerusalem. For example, the neighbourhood is known for supporting the right-wing Likud party. The crowd was fanatical in support of its team, but was much smaller than that of Betar Jerusalem.

In this league game, which took place in the Bnei-Yehuda stadium, the entire crowd which came to see the game amounted to just three thousand, about half of whom were Taibe supporters. This was the ninth game in the league. The gap between the two teams was relatively small: Bnei-Yehuda had 14 points, Taibe had 9 points. Since a win is rewarded with 3 points, a Taibe victory would have significantly narrowed the gap between them.

As was usual in Taibe's games, the two crowds were seated on the opposite sides of the stadium and, as in all Taibe games, the police were present in large numbers – much more so than in the other first division games that took place that season without Taibe. The Bnei-Yehuda management had arranged a welcoming ceremony. Greeting signs were posted on the fences of the stands. The Bnei-Yehuda crowd, however, had a different agenda. They greeted the visitors with chants of 'Death to the Arabs'.

The Taibe supporters were nervous because they had lost their previous three games. The fate of their team was occupying their minds, and they feared the consequences of another loss. The possibility of relegation loomed large and therefore, at the kick-off, the attention of the supporters was focused on the game itself. They aimed their anger and frustration at the team managers, the coach and the Taibe mayor, Rafik Haj-Yichye, who was present at the game as usual, sitting on the bench with the substitutes and the coach. In the Bnei-Yehuda stadium, the

distance between the stands and the field is very short. Thus, the Taibe supporters were able to conduct a dialogue with 'their' people – the coach, mayor and players, sitting on the bench.

The abuse from the stands of the Bnei-Yehuda crowd continued, but no goal had been conceded by Taibe by the end of the first half. This seemed promising, the team supporters were still hopeful, and they deliberately ignored the other side's shouts and ugly gestures.

The second half of the game was different. Bnei-Yehuda scored twice. Yet, the events on the field were normal for a soccer match, both sides using 'fair play' tactics – no untoward event was recorded concerning the players' behaviour. The supporters of Bnei-Yehuda, however, continued with their anti-Arab chants. The Taibe crowd now turned its attention toward the 'enemy'. Some responded with 'Death to the Jews' and proceeded to denigrate the low socio-economic origin of most of the other side's supporters calling them 'Baboons' and 'Barbarians'. But the most significant response was a cry of 'Cyprus, Cyprus', reminding the other side of the shameful defeat of the Israeli national team which was still a fresh sore in the minds and hearts of many Israelis.

This was a symptomatic call. It signified the problematic integration between being a soccer crowd like everybody else, and being an Arab minority in Israel, which means being 'other' and rejected. By yelling 'Cyprus Cyprus', the visitors signified to the host crowd – and implicitly to the entire Jewish population – that their identity is independent. 'Cyprus Cyprus' signified to the Taibe fans – and probably to all the Arabs in Israel that, 'it is *you* who lost in Cyprus' and 'it is *your* Israel which lost – you do not accept us as people therefore, we do not share in the poor result of the National Team'. This was another expression of Biladi: primarily, we belong here to the land (i.e. the country) but not to your nationality.

Nonetheless, nothing had basically changed; the 'dialectical cord' which tied the Arab minority to the Jewish majority remained as before. For some moments, the Taibe supporters could feel some satisfaction in not being part of that shameful defeat. The position of rejected minority was turned into an advantage. No special events were recorded after the game: The Bnei-Yehuda crowd was satisfied with the game's result, the Taibe crowd was frustrated and disappointed, more because of the outcome than the host supporters' behaviour. As in other Taibe games, the police was alert and prevented any contact between the two crowds. The Taibe supporters were escorted to their vehicles, while the victorious Bnei-Yehuda supporters walked to their nearby homes.

Conclusion

The first encounter, that of Taibe v. Betar, was much more aggressive than the second, Taibe v. Bnei-Yehuda, for the reasons specified above. However, both encounters are symptomatic of broader social processes. These were not just soccer games between two rivals teams, but encounters between two national

categories, taking place at a soccer stadium which was turned into an arena for a nationalistic clash between ethnic groups that also constitute a majority and a minority. As briefly outlined earlier, similar occurrences can be observed in Spain, in Scotland, and elsewhere throughout the world.

Considering the position of the Arab minority in Israel, these accounts express a deep and wider phenomenon, which is related to the question of the identity of the Arab minority in Israel. In order to comprehend the events which took place in the above games, it is necessary to treat them in close association with the Israeli political context, and particularly, with the concrete dependency relationships that underlie the contacts between Jews and Arabs in Israel and the former's status in the state. The soccer ground is a test case. It may serve as a mechanism of accommodation or confrontation. The dependency relations force the Arabs onto the alert at any meeting with the Jews. Hence, in the case of a confrontation with a certain type of crowd, as described above, the soccer ground may be turned into an overtly nationalistic battlefield, with the Arab football spectators forced to become the Arab minority.

The fact that Hapoel Taibe participated in the Israeli League may indicate that an option of accommodation was selected over other options. Dozens of Arab clubs play in the different divisions of the Israeli league. Yet, there is another option – the Islamic league which includes only Arab teams and has no connection with the Israeli Soccer Association. But this league is parochial: the only way to gain entry to the different European events is through the Israeli leagues which are managed by the Football Association. Also, the only way to receive public money – through the Soccer Lottery – is by being a member of the Football Association. Thus, the practical options are severely limited.

It might appear that the soccer ground in Israel offered two options to Arab supporters: 'to be together', that is, to behave like any other soccer crowd, or 'to be alone', that is, to behave as an Arab collective. However, the Arab supporters of Hapoel Taibe (and other Arab teams in other divisions of the Israeli league) have no autonomy of choice. They are dependent at the soccer stadium, as in other domains, on the Jewish majority. Inevitably, the meetings with aggressive, nationalistic crowds in the Haifa and Hatikva quarter stadiums, forced the Arab spectators to reconsider their position as individuals and as a collective. During these encounters, the Arab spectators were once again exposed to the problems associated with their identity. They were forced to consider who they are and what is their Biladi. Those among them who just wished to be soccer fans found it difficult to maintain this status – the Jewish crowd decided differently. The cries of 'Biladi Biladi' and 'Cyprus Cyprus' became boundary markers between two national identities that reside in the same state, 'Here we stand, the Taibe supporters, "born again" as the Arab collective in Israel.'

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