Soccer Fandom and Citizenship in Israel
Tamir Sorek

Since 2003, when Ittihad Abna‘ Sakhnin (in Hebrew, lhud Bnei Sakhnin, or Sons of Sakhnin United) first climbed up to the Israeli premier soccer league, its showdowns with Beitar Jerusalem, a team historically identified with the Israeli right, have been the biggest media attraction, and the biggest headache for the police, in all of Israeli sports. Sakhnin is now the only Arab team in the top bracket. For many, its matches with Beitar represent the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in miniature: The Beitar fans shout explicit anti-Arab slogans, and the Galilee town of Sakhnin has been a symbol of Arab resistance inside Israel since 1976, when three unarmed Palestinians were shot there (along with three others elsewhere) by police during protests against land confiscations by the state.

The reality, of course, is more complicated. For fans of both Beitar and Sakhnin, the games are an opportunity to display an ethnic pride they regard as subversive and anti-establishment, as well as aspirations to be included in a wider all-Israeli public sphere. It seems logical that soccer stadiums are also an important site of socialization of the rising generation: According to the Israel Football Association, about half of the fans who attend soccer games in person are between the ages of 14 and 24. At the games, youth from both sides observe and learn to adopt the interwoven strategies of protest and integration developed by their respective communities.

Mizrahi Pride, Jewish Nationalism and Anti-Arabism
The politicization of sports harkens back to the time before the establishment of the state of Israel. In the Mandate period, Maccabi teams were associated with the civic non-socialist trend within Zionism. Ha-Po‘el teams were drawn from the

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ranks of the Histadrut, the General Federation of Labor Unions controlled by the socialist Zionist tendency, which led the country’s governments until 1977. Beitar was the outgrowth of the revisionist Zionist youth movement founded in 1923 by Ze'ev Jabotinsky. In 1936, the Jerusalem branch of Beitar founded a sports club fielding squads in soccer and other sports. In the 1940s, most of the team’s players were members of the right-wing Irgun or Lehi underground terrorist organizations, and some of them were expelled from Palestine by British authorities. Later, Beitar teams became linked to Herut, the small right-wing party led by Menachem Begin that was the kernel of Likud, which first swept to power in the 1977 elections.

Whereas Ha-Po’el Jerusalem was the team of the establishment, Beitar attracted outsiders, the oppressed and the victimized. Jerusalem absorbed many of the Jews who immigrated en masse from Arab and Muslim countries (Mizrahi, in contemporary Israeli parlance) during the 1950s and 1960s. The immigrants found themselves relegated to the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy and the margins of the political system. For this population, cheering for Beitar became a means of political protest against the hegemony of the mostly Ashkenazi (Jews of European origin) Labor Party. The Beitar Jerusalem bleachers still resound with songs and slogans borrowed and adapted from old Sephardi Jewish religious tunes.

Beitar’s transformation from a local club to a team with a national following is related to the close relationship between the team and Likud leaders, as well as the coincidence in time of Beitar’s first major achievements (winning the Israel State Cup tournament in 1976 and 1979) with the political upheaval that brought Likud into power. Although Likud candidates for prime minister were always Ashkenazim, by dint of being the major challengers to Labor hegemony, they attracted about half of Mizrahi voters between 1977 and 1992. The demographic coalition enabling Likud’s victory was reflected in the growing circle of Beitar boosters. Support for Beitar, in fact, has merged elements of soccer fandom with Mizrahi ethnic pride and Likud political belonging, though Likud has never identified itself explicitly as a Mizrahi champion.

The most interesting form of Beitar fan protest, however, is the consistent and vocal anti-Arab tone in the stands. Some hardcore fans even consider anti-Arabism to be integral to the identity of the club.

This phenomenon requires special attention because it lies at the heart of both Beitar-Sakhnin relations and the mixing of Mizrahi protest with Jewish patriotism among Beitar supporters. Several scholars have written about the difficulties of Mizrahi in dealing with the Arab component of their identity. Immigrants from Arab countries found in Zionism a powerful hegemonic ideology, with a strong dose of Orientalism in its discourses and practices. Add the fact that Arabs have been the historical enemies of Zionism, and many Mizrahi felt compelled to de-Arabize and de-Orientalize their appearance, as well as their cultural preferences. In Ella Shohat’s words, “For the Arab Jew, existence under Zionism has meant a profound and visceral schizophrenia, mingling stubborn self-pride with an imposed self-rejection, typical products of a situation of colonial ambivalence.”

In addition, during the first decades of the state’s existence, Arab Palestinians and Mizrahi Jews competed for the same low-paying jobs, a competition which was much less familiar to Ashkenazi middle-class men. These factors have created a particularly tense relationship between Mizrahi Jews and Palestinians, despite their relative cultural proximity. For Mizrahi, obtaining acceptance as legitimate Israelis has been conditioned on their ability to draw clear distinctions between themselves and the Palestinians. Adopting and emphasizing nationalistic, hawkish and, at times, Arab-hating views seemingly enables Mizrahi to blur what they have in common with Palestinian Arabs.

The repertoire of Beitar fans, therefore, includes some rather unrefined anti-Arab and anti-Muslim messages. The religious jibes ("Muhammad is dead" or "Muhammad is gay") provoke the angrier reactions, as do national-religious provocations that reference the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, such as "the Temple Mount is ours." The best-known slogan, however, is "death to the Arabs." Anat Rimon-Or has brilliantly identified these cries as a form of counter-hegemonic protest, since they interfere with the humanistic liberal rhetoric so often deployed as a cover for Zionist indifference to Arab life. Explicit demands to kill Arabs both back the Zionist ethos and disrupt it by exposing its inconsistency. Rimon-Or and others rightly accuse Israeli media commentators of hypocrisy; in that they are much more sensitive to these words than to actual deaths of Arabs at the hands of Israeli security forces.

Still, while there is no doubt that soccer is an excellent opportunity for the Hebrew media to practice a self-flattering liberalism, this criticism of the media underestimates the short distance between words and deeds. It is not a coincidence that Moshe Nissim, the D-9 operator who bulldozed hundreds of houses in the Jenin refugee camp in April 2002, planted a large flag of Beitar Jerusalem atop his bulldozer before beginning his "work." In a newspaper interview, this devout Beitar fan said: "There were many people in the houses we set out to destroy…. I did not see a house fall on a live person. But if there was such a case, I don’t give a damn. I’m sure that people died in these houses, but it was hard to see…. I made them a stadium in the middle of the camp." Obviously, Nissim is not the only soldier who has killed Arabs, but he is the only one who did it under the banner of his soccer team, which is known for its rhythmic slogan demanding exactly that. Against this background, other arrows in the Beitar backers’ verbal quiver—"May your village burn," "I swear to God that Arabs won’t be here"—should be taken more seriously.

Conflict Over the Conflict’s Definition

Iritah Abna Sakhnin has missed only one season of premier league play since 2003. Its success was preceded by that
of another Arab team, Ha-Po'el Ta'ibeh, which visited the premier league for one season in 1996–1997. As the stronger team, however, Sakhnin constitutes the greater challenge to the ethnic logic of Beitar fans, who did not miss an opportunity to express their discomfort after Sakhnin ascended to the premier league. In May 2004 Sakhnin even won the Israel State Cup, gaining the right to represent Israel in the European Cup tournament the following year. After Sakhnin's victory, a notice was published on an important Beitar-supporting website, The Fans' Camp: "With deep sorrow we announce that Sakhnin won the State Cup. The Fans' Camp will go dark until tomorrow. [Signed:] The Fans' Camp website, Beitar's fans, the State of Israel and the Jewish People." Not only were Beitar fans suffering private pain, apparently, but also the Jewish people had sustained a collective defeat. On October 4, 2004, Beitar was defeated 4-1 by Sakhnin in Jerusalem. Beitar fans published a video clip on the Internet that showed the goals scored in the game, accompanied by a dolorous Mizrahi song and introduced by the words: "Yesterday was the most painful, humiliating and embarrassing day in the history of our club since it was founded in 1936.... This day is now inscribed in the history books as a day of mourning."

Similar attempts to nationalize the Beitar-Sakhnin rivalry can be found in the Arabic sports press, which frequently uses militaristic metaphors to describe Arab-Jewish soccer encounters, and in the statements of Arab politicians who describe Arab victories as challenges to the state. After Sakhnin's 2004 triumph over Beitar, the newspaper Kull al-Arab quoted an anonymous fan saying: "We raised the Arabs' heads high. The victory over Beitar has more than one meaning. This is the team which represents the state, and especially the extremists." In May 2005, after Sakhnin had secured a slot in the premier league for another season, Member of Knesset Muhammad Baraka declared: "Sakhnin symbolizes the war we have against the state." That these nationalist notes are sounded is evidence that, in certain contexts and to a certain extent, soccer is an opportunity to rehabilitate Palestinians' national masculinity.

At the same time, and in contradistinction to the discourse of Beitar fans, as well as Arab politicians and sports reporters, Sakhnin supporters in the stadium constantly strive to denationalize their conflicts with Jewish fans. They are, in fact, cautious about displaying national pride.

Sakhnin's success made it the pride and joy of Arab fans throughout the country. Sakhnin is the only team in the premier league that has more fans than the number of residents in its home city. In the cup final played between Sakhnin and Ha-Po'el Haifa in Ramat Gan on May 18, 2004, some three
quarters of the 38,000 spectators were Arabs, most of them not from Sakhnin. Any feelings of Arab or Palestinian pride, however, remained mostly unstated in the stadium.

Unlike the cases of “flagship” teams of ethno-national minorities such as Athletic Bilbao in Spain (Basques) or the Jeunesse Sportive de Kabylie in Algeria (Berbers), it is uncommon to see forthright expressions of nationalism in the stands at Sakhnin matches. During the historic cup final game between Sakhnin and Ha-Po’el Haifa, I noticed only one such expression among the crowd of thousands, made up of Arab men and women of several ages and regional origins: a spectator wearing a pendant fashioned in the shape of Handala (the iconic character of the Palestinian political cartoonist Naji al-‘Ali). Palestinian flags were also absent, and they are rarely seen at other Sakhnin matches. Though Palestinian citizens have cause to be aggrieved by the Zionist establishment, the game did not turn into a spectacle of protest.

The key for understanding this seeming paradox lies in the tendency of most Arab soccer fans in Israel to see Arab success in soccer as an opportunity to be accepted as legitimate Israeli citizens. Despite the image of soccer as a bastion of racism and violence, these fans see the sport as a “liberal shelter,” in which the discriminatory mechanisms of the state are less effective. They therefore tend to emphasize love of “the beautiful game” as the common denominator tying them to Jewish fans. Declarations of Arab or Palestinian patriotism might disrupt the comity, since most Israeli Jews consider these to be an extreme form of protest. The Sakhnin stadium’s slogans are either the same Hebrew cheers used by backers of other Israeli teams, or the same Hebrew curses heavy on sexism and homophobia (“Beitar is a whore,” “Beitar on the prick”), or non-nationalist religious idioms, such as “pray for the prophet.”

Against this background, the games against Beitar constitute a special challenge, given the nature of the provocations Sakhnin’s cheering section has to face. The vocabulary used by Sakhnin supporters when talking about these matches, and especially when addressing the Hebrew media, reflects a clear tendency to redefine the conflict as a moral struggle between “enlightened, tolerant fans” and “racist fanatics.” Sakhnin fans’ insults of other teams and players are rarely anti-Jewish and not even often anti-Israel. One does hear sporadic curses of the state, but these voices tend to be shouted down quickly by the crowd. In January 2006, during a tumultuous Beitar-Sakhnin match, after the camps had exchanged curses, a Sakhnin fan faced the television camera and stated: “They are not Jews; they are racist.” The subtext was: I curse them not because of their ethnic identity as Jews (as they curse us because we are Arabs), but because of their moral flaws.

The Billionaire and the Base

The sides in the Beitar-Sakhnin conflict have one important thing in common. Since 2005, the sponsor of both teams has been Arkadi Gaydamak, a Russian Jewish billionaire who holds passports from five different countries and is wanted in France for alleged illegal weapons deals. In August of that year, he purchased Beitar Jerusalem and became its president. During the same month, he had begun to support Sakhnin financially. Both teams’ fortunes improved as the mogul opened his wallet to sign blue-chip talent: In 2007, Beitar took home its first championship in nine years without a title, and Sakhnin elevated itself back into the premier league. In September, given the obvious conflict of interest, the Israeli Football Association instructed Gaydamak to divest himself of his shares in Sakhnin, but the tycoon is still looking for indirect ways to bankroll the team.

Gaydamak’s instrumental motives are clear. In the next parliamentary elections he will run with his recently established party, Social Justice. The draft party platform declares an aspiration to “create a common denominator for minorities that are discriminated against.” Palestinian citizens are envisioned as a major constituency, and with the scope of his philanthropic projects, Gaydamak has made it clear that he intends to win the votes of all the working classes of Israel. He has a known ambition to become mayor of Jerusalem, which might seem to explain his patronage of the city’s Beitar club. But Beitar Jerusalem famously boasts a fan base spread out all over the country, especially in the economically weak “development towns” on the periphery of major cities, populated mostly by Mizrahi. So Gaydamak would seem to be aiming higher than Jerusalem city hall.
The purchase of Beitar by Gaydamak made it the richest and strongest club in Israel, and certainly increased his popularity among the fans. Shortly after buying Beitar, however, Gaydamak's political strategy flunked its first test when he attempted to heal the rift in his potential voter base by declaring his intention to recruit 'Abbas Sawan, the former captain of Sakhnin, to Beitar.

Beitar is the only team in the Israeli premier league that has never had an Arab player on its roster, and Beitar's fans have a documented record of blocking any move to sign one. In 2000, a Druze player, Wisam 'Ismi, was invited to try out for the team. The fact that 'Ismi, like many Druze, had served in the Israel Defense Forces did not prevent a group of Beitar boosters from greeting him with a shower of curses, which they kept up throughout the practice. 'Ismi did not join Beitar. The anti-Arab stand has translated into more general anti-Muslim hostility; in 2004, the Nigerian Muslim player Ibrahim Naddallah started the season on the roster, but departed halfway through following consistent harassment by the crowd.\textsuperscript{11}

It seems that, in courting Sawan, Gaydamak underestimated the weight of this anti-Arab sentiment among Beitar's most enthusiastic and influential supporters, and, in the face of their furious protest, he quietly dropped the initiative. The numerical strength of anti-Arab voices in the large and diverse Beitar fan base is unclear. It is evident, however, that the racists were strong enough to prevent the club's president from setting a precedent.

The power struggle between Gaydamak and the crowd has continued. In the summer of 2006, a group of fans flung religious imprecations at a 17-year-old Ghanaian on the club's junior squad, whom they had mistaken for a Muslim because of his name, Bukri Sadat. Sadat soon decamped for another club. In April 2007 Gaydamak declared his intention to recruit two "Muslim players" for the upcoming season. Hundreds of fans demonstrated in protest, shouting at Gaydamak, "There are Arabs, there are no fans."\textsuperscript{12} They prevailed again—the team commenced the season without the promised additions to the roster. During a Beitar-Sakhnin game in October, a Beitar fan told a Channel 10 TV reporter: "On the day there is an Arab player [on Beitar's team], not a single fan will stay. Everyone will commit suicide. I have a Beitar tattoo on my back. I'd efface it with an iron."

For his part, Sakhnin player 'Abbas Sawan put into words the integrative role that most Arab fans assign to soccer, and the caution they exercise as a consequence in the stadium. In a "reconciliation meal" at Gaydamak's home following the troubled match in January 2006, he said: "The 'reconciliation meal' symbolizes the understanding that we are only using a tool called soccer to [achieve] something more important: peace and coexistence."\textsuperscript{13}
Exclusion and Inclusion

In the meantime, the outsider billionaire, who speaks neither Hebrew nor Arabic, has inadvertently exposed the similarities in the sociological location of the fans of both Beitar Jerusalem and Istihad Abu'a Sakhnin. Soccer fandom provides an avenue for the booster bases, in dual fashion, to register both their ethnic or nationalist protest, and their quest for acceptance as full citizens of the state of Israel. At the same time, because of the relative youth of soccer fans who attend the games, soccer might function as an influential socializing tool toward adopting these strategies.

For the core of Beitar’s fans, the unvarnished demand to exclude Arabs from the Israeli collective identity—to the point of expelling and killing them—is their route to recognition as legitimate Israelis and a form of protest against the hegemonic ideology that has excluded them. For Sakhnin’s fans, the chance to beat Jewish teams in a physical contest is an opportunity to rehabilitate the national masculinity, because of their shaky status as citizens. Overt displays of national pride are largely excluded from soccer’s domain. The encounter of these two subtle dialectics creates a contested terrain, which one camp attempts to define as a national struggle between Jews and Arabs, and the other as a moral struggle between tolerant soccer enthusiasts and fanatical racists. More than a microcosm of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Beitar-Sakhnin games represent a struggle over the legitimate boundaries of Israeli citizenship, in which both sides aspire to be included.

Endnotes

6 [Arabic]
7 NRG Sport, May 28, 2005.
8 In 2005, the population of Sakhnin numbered 25,000. In the same year, a study ordered by the Israel Football Association concluded that about 25,000 people in Israel identified as fans of Sakhnin, making it the fifth most popular team in the country. These fans were found to be more loyal to their team than any other fans, another indication that in the case of Sakhnin fandom is related to ethnic-national attachment. The study is online at http://football.org.il/Archive/Articles/Pages/11375.asp.
9 See Tamir Sorek, Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Equation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
11 In a survey ordered by the Israel Soccer Association in 1997, 46 percent of development town residents declared themselves to be fans of Beitar. Cited in Shlomo Reznik, “The Sport Association Beitar: Sports, Politics and a Divided Society,” in Haim Kaufmann and Hagai Hatlif, eds., Body Culture and Sport in Israel in the Twentieth Century (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2002). [Hebrew]
12 YNet, October 24, 2004, and other news reports.

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