

The 'Global Game' in the Middle East

An exploration of Islamic opposition to the sport of football

MA Thesis International Relations in Historical Perspective

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Introduction

For millions in the Middle East, football is a source of excitement, frustration, rivalry and pride.¹ However, for the inhabitants of a Jordanian refugee camp six miles from the Syrian border, football often means much more. The Zaatari refugee camp attempts to use football as a way of rebuilding the lives of the children of the camp. It is hoped that an engagement with the sport will help rehabilitate the children from the traumas experienced in Syria, while alleviating the difficulties of day-to-day life in the camp.² As coach Bassam Omar Al-Taleb explains, “the children arrive completely devastated...many have seen family members killed before their eyes, while the journey to Jordan is a difficult one”. Football is used to “remove the sense of fear and give them a sense of normalcy”.³ Hence, the Asian Football Development Project (AFDP) has built numerous pitches, and brought in football coaches from Europe to coach refugees and to organise teams and leagues in the camp.⁴ Proponents of the project highlight how football has built sense of community in the camp. This is attributed to the all-embracing nature of football – anyone in the camp is able to play, or as another coach at Zaatari put it, “we all speak the language of football”.⁵

However, the football project has not been embraced by everyone at the Zaatari refugee camp. It experienced significant resistance from parents who refused to let their children play football. A majority of the inhabitants come from particularly ultra-conservative communities in rural Syria, where women are not allowed to play sports in public. Faced with rising tensions, the project subsequently built a private pitch to enable

¹ V. Lyon, ‘A Different Kind of Victory: How the Zaatari Refugee Camp is Using Soccer’, *American Islamic Congress*, <https://aicongress.org/2014/06/a-different-kind-of-victory-how-the-zaatari-refugee-camp-is-using-soccer/>, Accessed 27 October 2017.

² E. Whitman, ‘Syrian refugees find normalcy in football’, *Al-Jazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2014/06/syrian-refugees-football-201462812734250415.html>, Accessed 5 November 2017.

³ J. Wilson, ‘Football becomes mother to Syria's traumatised child refugees’, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/blog/2013/dec/03/football-syria-zaatari-child-refugees>, Accessed 12 October 2017.

⁴ P. Schwartzstein, ‘Syria’s Female Refugee Soccer Stars’, *The Daily Beast*, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/syrias-female-refugee-soccer-stars>, Accessed 15 October 2017.

⁵ J. Wilson, Op. Cit.

female participation in the project.⁶ Despite this, tensions remained as a number of parents were reluctant to see their sons or daughters play football at all, as they view the sport as impermissible for Muslims.⁷

Islamic religious leaders have long debated whether football is 'permissible' for Muslims.⁸ The game's introduction to the Middle East by European missionaries, merchants and colonial powers in the late nineteenth century was met with curiosity and excitement from the masses. However, the region's religious and secular leaders viewed the new sport with suspicion, deeming it a potential threat to their social and political authority. A number of secular leaders soon realised that football could in fact be harnessed in order to advance particular policies, gain legitimacy, increase public support or pacify the masses.⁹ Yet, a number of Islamic religious leaders in the Middle East have continued to denounce the sport. These religious leaders have belonged to a variety of schools of thought within Islam, with similarly varied and complex rationale for denouncing football. Despite this, there are certain running themes in their disapproval of football – many cite the 'un-Islamic' nature of the sport and its supposed challenge to the supremacy of Islamic law, with others claiming the game is a Western or Judo-Christian import designed to distract Muslims from their religious duties and from 'Western evils'.¹⁰

In examining this opposition to football, two particular moments in time emerge as focal points for Islamic leader opposition to football – namely the Iranian revolution of 1979, and a series of 'anti-football' fatwas (religious rulings) from 2005 onwards. These focused anti-football campaigns are worthy of further exploration in detailing the complex and multifaceted relationship between a number of religious spokespeople and the region's

⁶ J. Montague, 'Syria conflict: Kicking for hope in Zaatari refugee camp', *CNN*, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/03/14/sport/football/zaatari-refugee-camp/index.html>, Accessed 25 October 2017.

⁷ E. Whitman, Op. Cit.

⁸ A. Raab, 'Soccer in the Middle East: an introduction', *Soccer & Society Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 5-6 (2012), p. 623.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ N. Brookes, 'Football: Second Religion of the Middle East', *Middle East Eye*, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/essays/football-second-religion-middle-east-1550542133>, Accessed 15 October 2017.

most popular sport. Specifically, it highlights that football functions as a flash point for debates around numerous social issues within the Middle East. When Islamic clerics and scholars enter debate the around the permissibility of football, they are “drawn into the globalised public sphere of football”, serving to provide ‘local’ input to a global debate. For instance, they provide judgements on how the global game relates to local concerns around Sharia law (the permissible and the forbidden), jihad and the purported East versus West schism.¹¹

Furthermore, it is seen through these two instances that rejecting football is not as clear-cut in practice as the rhetoric often suggests. Football’s unrivalled popularity in the Middle East and around the world means that opposing the game is frequently an untenable position.¹² The deep-seated passion for the game, which is so often seen as a major threat by clerics and scholars, means many religious leaders fall short of completely condemning football. Accordingly, the rejection of football is rarely ubiquitous within a particular branch of Islam. While some religious leaders also see denouncing football as self-defeating, as it has the potential to alienate a portion of their support base. In the case of the 2005 fatwas specifically, it becomes clear that the religious rulings fail to influence government policies towards football. Middle Eastern states are increasingly prioritising football due to the perceived financial and soft power opportunities it provides.

Despite these failings, one area in which the anti-football campaigns have a significant wider societal impact is through influencing jihadist group policy towards football. Specifically, the anti-football religious rulings from 2005 provide the theological underpinnings for Islamic State’s attack on football within its territories. Their supporters circulate the fatwas on online forums in order to encourage and justify terror attacks on football stadia around the world. While bans on watching football and playing by the internationally accepted rules draw heavily on the controversial religious rulings denouncing

¹¹ M. Terdman, ‘Deliberations over Global Football among Radical Muslim ‘Fundamentalists’; in U. Mårtensson, J. Bailey, P. Ringrose, and A. Dyrendal, *Fundamentalism in the Modern World Vol. 2, Fundamentalism and Communication: Culture, Media and the Public Sphere* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), p. 314.

¹² Ibid.

football. However, Islamic State's relations with football also mirror the issues experienced by religious leaders in their anti-football campaigns. Namely, the group similarly fail to curb the popularity of football in its territories, while recognising that opposing football is self-defeating. The group 'straddle the fence' in their relations with football – at times condemning and attacking the game, but also employing football as a recruitment tool when it suits.¹³

This thesis seeks to understand the complexities of religious and ideological Islamic opposition to the sport of football. It offers football as the trigger for wider societal debates on westernisation and globalisation in the Middle East, while reflecting geopolitical disputes and the balance of power in the region. It surveys the attitudes of religious leaders to football as a physical pastime and as a spectator sport, highlighting particular moments of opposition to the sport. The research firstly seeks to provide historical context for such opposition, later analysing the contemporary opposition to the sport from religious leaders, seen through a recent spate of online religious rulings. While it is not an exhaustive catalogue of Islamic opposition to football, it offers telling positions along a range of religious and ideological Islamic factions. I find that Islamic opposition to football is by no means monolithic – the game has been simultaneously embraced by reactionaries and opposed by seemingly more moderate elements. These complicated responses to something as apparently innocuous as football offer an insight into the broader conflict between certain strains of Islam and particularly 'global' contemporary social practices. The analysis of this convoluted Islamic opposition to football further concludes that Islamic opposition to the region's most popular sport is often an untenable, self-defeating position, which achieves little de facto success in turning a large numbers of Muslims against the sport. Yet, it would be erroneous to dismiss this opposition as insignificant – this thesis finds that much of the Islamic opposition to football strengthens the resolve of contemporary jihadist groups in their policy towards the sport.

¹³ J. Dorsey, 'Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw', *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 60 No. 9 (2016), pp. 1070-1072.

Given the centrality of football to the Middle East and its rich history spanning over a century, it is particularly surprising that until relatively recently, academics ignored the role of football in the region.¹⁴ Renowned works such as Eugene Rogan's *The Arabs: A History*, which includes many accounts by individuals detailing daily life, fails to reference the role of football in the region.¹⁵ Similarly, English-language football historians seeking to explore the 'global' nature of football, have continually ignored the Middle East as a unit of analysis.¹⁶ David Goldblatt's *The Ball Is Round* and Kausik Bandyopadhyay's *Fringe Nations in World Soccer*, however, are impressive works that begin to redress the balance in detailing the region's football history.¹⁷

However, since Qatar won the right to host the 2022 World Cup – becoming the first country in the Middle East to host the competition – a significant body of literature has developed.¹⁸ Namely, academic journals such as *The International Review for the History of Sport*, *Sport in Society*, and *The International Review for the Sociology of Sport* have emerged. In exploring the relationship between Islam and football specifically however, articles such as James Dorsey's *Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw*,¹⁹ Moshe Terdman's *Deliberations over Global Football among Radical Muslim 'Fundamentalists'*,²⁰ and Alon Raab's *Soccer in the Middle East: An Introduction*²¹ are thorough and enlightening works. James Dorsey in particular, is a scholar who has written extensively on Islam and jihadist group relations with football. Despite this, the academic research directly exploring Islam's

¹⁴ E. Shor, 'Sports and the Middle East', *The Middle East Institute*, <https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Sports%20in%20ME.pdf>, Accessed 15 October 2017; and A. Raab, Op. Cit., p. 626.

¹⁵ E. Rogan, *The Arabs: A History* (London: Penguin, 2012); and A. Raab, Op. Cit., p. 626.

¹⁶ A. Raab, Op. Cit., p. 626.

¹⁷ D. Goldblatt, *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Soccer* (London: Riverhead Books, 2008); and K. Bandyopadhyay and S. Mallick, *Fringe Nations in World Soccer* (London: Routledge, 2013).

¹⁸ J. Dorsey, 'Soccer in the Middle East', *Soccer and Society Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 14 (2016), p. 648.

¹⁹ J. Dorsey, 'Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw', Op. Cit.

²⁰ M. Terdman, Op. Cit.

²¹ A. Raab, Op. Cit.

relationship with football is limited, presenting an opportunity to increase the volume of research in an under-developed body of literature.

Research Objective

In this paper I intend to explore the complex and multi-faceted relationship between Islam and the sport of football. Specifically, the paper aims to firstly provide historical context for Islamic opposition to football, highlighting particular moments in time where religious leaders have denounced the sport. The paper later seeks to analyse the contemporary societal impact of Islamic opposition to football, exploring the opposition of the jihadist group, Islamic State, to the sport of football. The primary method of research is through the analysis of numerous fatwas (religious rulings) issued by Islamic religious leaders (scholars and clerics with religious authority). The importance of these fatwas to the region varies depending on their content, but also the religious authority of the specific cleric. Through exploring these religious rulings, it becomes clear that football is a flash point for wider societal debates within the region, serving as a battlefield for the hearts and minds of millions. It must be noted however that passing judgements on Islamic religious leader's opposition to football is beyond the scope of the paper. There is a tendency at times to view football as a harmless sport that everyone can play and enjoy anywhere in the world. Yet this research serves to highlight that there are a number authoritative voices in the Muslim world who vehemently disapprove of the sport.

It is hoped that in the lead up to the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, this paper will significantly add to the awareness of the complexities in the relationship between football and the Middle East's dominant religion. While issues like Qatar's ban on alcohol have been cited in mainstream media as one perceived conflict between Islam and the 'global' game, the awareness of the broader complexities of the relationship are generally underappreciated.²²

²² S. Dun, 'No beer, no way! Football fan identity enactment won't mix with Muslim beliefs in the Qatar 2022 World Cup', *Journal of Policy Research in Tourism, Leisure and Events*, Vol. 6 No. 2 (2014), pp. 186-199.

Outline of the Paper

The paper first seeks to provide historical context for the relationship between Islam and football. The following section highlights the initial opposition to the sport after its introduction to the Middle East from secular and religious leaders alike. The paper goes on to explore the two occasions where Islamic religious leaders have initiated focused campaigns condemning the sport – namely the opposition to football in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, and a series of religious rulings issued after 2005. The scrutiny of these religious rulings after 2005 serves as the main body of research analysis, highlighting the key themes which motivate religious leaders to disapprove of the game. The final section seeks to analyse the consequences of the anti-football fatwas – detailing the issues that religious leaders have in curbing the popularity and influence of football, while exploring their role in motivating Islamic State’s attack on football.

Football in the Middle East

From the introduction of modern football to the Middle East in the late nineteenth century, the sport has been an important part of the region. Football's birth, life and development in the Middle East has been influenced by, and shaped, important social and historical cultural processes like "colonisation, nationalism, women's liberation, urbanism, state building, globalisation and political revolt".²³ As in many other parts of the world, football has outgrown its existence as a simple form of recreational physical exercise, becoming one of the region's central social practices. It is an outlet for many emotions – the people of the Middle East often turn to football to keep their minds off the difficulties of day-to-day life, to express national, regional and diasporic pride and identity, or to voice dissent, enact resistance and demand reforms.²⁴ Beyond this, football's immense popularity and global outreach has initiated a business of astronomical dimensions for the region's investors and businesses. Gulf state investor and businesses dominate sponsorships, advertising, and broadcasting rights around the world, while some of the biggest clubs in Europe are owned and bankrolled by sovereign wealth funds from Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.²⁵ Wealthy Middle Eastern governments are acutely aware that football can be a lever to pursue other goals such as nation-branding, soft power projection and resource acquisition.²⁶ The mantra that football is 'more than a game' is clichéd, yet it is entirely appropriate to describe the game's presence in the Middle East.

This is not to suggest the rise of football in the region has been smooth sailing. When encountering the game for the first time, Middle Eastern authorities regularly viewed it with suspicion and debated its permissibility. This was first seen in Turkey at the turn of the century – after Istanbul and Izmir natives observed English merchants playing the game,

²³ A. Raab, Op. Cit., p. 619.

²⁴ M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 323.

²⁵ J. Capapé, 'The Kings of the King Sports: Sovereign Wealth Funds and Football', *Tufts University*, <https://sites.tufts.edu/sovereignet/files/2017/08/SWFs-and-Football.pdf>, Accessed 12 November 2017.

²⁶ S. Chadwick, "A 198m transfer is not about football. It's about soft power", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/01/neymar-transfer-barcelona-soft-power-asian-governments>, Accessed 5 November 2017.

Sultan Abdulhamit II banned Turks from participating.²⁷ The Sultan banned football as he perceived it to be a cultural and political threat. He believed it to be a “menace to indigenous and Islamic culture, as well as a potential political challenge as highly educated urban Turks were enamoured by the game”.²⁸ As a prelude to future opposition to football from segments of the militant Islamist school of thought, prominent religious clerics within the Ottoman elite vehemently supported the Sultan’s ban of football. They cited football as a distraction from the study of the Quran, its inappropriate dress and symbolising blasphemy as it resembled the kicking of the severed head of Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, by his killers in 680 CE.²⁹ The upholding of the Sultan’s ban was futile however. His power was waning substantially and the desire of Turks to play the new sport instigated the formation of the first Turkish football team in 1901, and the creation of the first league in 1904.³⁰

Similarly, when Iran was first exposed to modern football by British consul officials and oil explorers in 1908, the sport was met with hostility from the country’s leaders. In a foretaste of contemporary tensions between cultural traditionalism and modernity, Iranian leaders cited football’s “modernist imperatives” as a challenge to indigenous sports like wrestling.³¹ Traditional wrestling (or *Zurkhane*, literally ‘house of strength’) was first practised in the mithraic-zoroastrian times and is viewed as an important element of Shia Muslim and Persian identity. The sport is claimed to embody values desirable in Islam like athleticism, generosity and loyalty, whilst in contrast, football is perceived as superficial and too competitive.³² Such was the fear that football would usurp virtuous indigenous games like wrestling, Iranians playing football were arrested or beaten up.³³ These attempts to

²⁷ B. Fozooni, ‘Religion, politics and class: conflict and contestation in the development of football in Iran’, *Soccer & Society Journal*, Vol. 5 No. 3 (2004), p. 356.

²⁸ Y. Cho, *Football in Asia: History, Culture and Business* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 45.

²⁹ Y. Cho, Op. Cit.

³⁰ B. Fozooni, Op. Cit.

³¹ Ibid. p. 357.

³² C. Bromberger, ‘Sport as a Touchstone for Social Change: A third half for Iranian football’, *Le Monde Diplomatique*, <https://mondediplo.com/1998/04/04iran>, Accessed 28 November 2017.

³³ H. Chehabi, ‘The Politics of Football in Iran’; in K. Bandyopadhyay and S. Mallick, *Fringe Nations in World Soccer* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 80-81.

curb the popularity of football were once again unsuccessful however, with foreign schools and European Embassy staff continuing to promote the game to the local populace. While the future founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty, Reza Khan, heavily endorsed football, viewing it as a mechanism of transferring tribal allegiance to central government.³⁴

These examples of the early opposition to modern football clearly failed to halt the game's introduction and rise to prominence in Iran and Turkey. Yet, this was symptomatic of the Middle East as a whole – despite some initial reluctance to accept modern football, the game grew rapidly in popularity and importance throughout the region. Proletariat support of the game spiralled. In 1935, an English observer wrote: “football has conquered the region too and is played all over...in towns and tiny hamlets, by most of the schoolboys and men”.³⁵ At the same time, leaders and regimes increasingly encouraged football in their countries, viewing it as a way of advancing particular policies, gaining legitimacy, increasing public support or pacifying the masses.³⁶ They saw that a successful local or national football team often increased citizen support and conferred authority to the regime. The founder and first President of the Republic of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was one leader who harnessed the game in the 1920's as a way of furthering his secular nationalist and Westernisation agenda. The Saudi royal family also realised the benefits of encouraging the game in order to maintain popular support and legitimacy. They have continuously controlled the national football federation and owned several clubs.³⁷

Islamic football?

Yet, football's presence and popularity in the Middle East has continued to be a contentious issue for some. Specifically, a number of the region's Islamic religious leaders have continued to denounce the sport. These religious leaders have belonged to a variety of schools of thought within Islam, while their rationale for rebuking football has been similarly

³⁴ B. Fozooni, *Op. Cit.*, p. 357.

³⁵ H. Chehabi, *Op. Cit.*, p. 84.

³⁶ A. Raab, *Op. Cit.*, p. 623.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

complex and varied from case to case. Despite this, there are certain running themes in their disapproval of football – many cite the ‘un-Islamic’ nature of the sport and its supposed challenge to the supremacy of Islamic law, with others claiming the game is a Western or Judo-Christian import designed to distract Muslims from their religious duties and from ‘Western evils’.

Although this opposition to football from Islamic religious leaders has seemingly never subsided, there have been particular moments in time where the opposition has come to the fore, influencing state policy towards football, or inciting impassioned societal debates. One such moment was seen in the aftermath of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. In the lead up to 1979, revolutionary Islamist leaders often alleged that the Shah promoted football to keep the population apolitical and divert attention from ‘serious’ matters, and encouraged Islamist militants to disrupt matches.³⁸ Yet, with the triumph of the revolutionaries in early 1979, a more concerted and comprehensive anti-football campaign was enforced by Iran’s mullahs. The mullahs expressed their disapproval of the game in a pamphlet published soon after the revolution, arguing that money spent on football would be better invested in social and economic development.³⁹ However, in reality the anti-football campaign was primarily motivated by “religiously inspired puritanism combined with revolutionary asceticism”.⁴⁰ In other words, revolutionary Islamist leaders drew upon a school of thought in Islam which views sport as self-indulgent and lacking rational purpose, while seeking to discontinue ‘un-Islamic’ cultural habits practiced under the Shah.

The religious puritanism inspiring the Iranian mullahs to attack football employs a literal interpretation of the Quran’s teaching on sport. Specifically, this interpretation dictates that the sports mentioned in the Quran, namely horse racing and archery, are the

³⁸ H. Chehabi, Op. Cit., p. 87.

³⁹ J. Dorsey, ‘A Rare Saudi-Iranian Détente: No Soccer, Please!’, *The Globalist*, <https://www.theglobalist.com/saudi-arabia-islam-iran-soccer-religion/>, Accessed 13 November 2017.

⁴⁰ H. Chehabi, Op. Cit., p. 88.

only permissible sports.⁴¹ They are deemed permissible due to their utility in improving physical fitness, psychology and skills in preparation for jihad. Other sports like football, are self-indulgent forms of entertainment offering little in the way of physical improvement.⁴² Hence, whilst favouring ‘useful’ sports like wrestling and archery, the Islamist mullahs attempted to curb football’s influence and popularity with Islamic propaganda organisations espousing the “useless” and “clown” nature of the sport.⁴³ The religious authorities symbolically appropriated the football field of Tehran University to hold the ritual weekly Friday prayers.⁴⁴ While football matches and mini-tournaments would get cancelled on the flimsiest of pretexts.⁴⁵

It is worth noting that this puritanical disapproval of certain sports is not unique to Islamist Muslim leaders in Iran or even Islam in general. When King James I and Charles I of England legalised the playing of certain sports on Sundays in *Book of Sports*, puritan Christians were furious. They approved of sports that “served a rational purpose, that of recreation necessary for physical efficiency”, but not sports or activities that were “purely a means of enjoyment”.⁴⁶ Despite this, once the Christian puritans of seventeenth century England gained power under Oliver Cromwell, they were unable to enact bans on sports they disapproved of as the people’s natural propensity to play and compete in sport for entertainment persisted.⁴⁷

Similarly, the post-revolution anti-football campaign in Iran did not survive for long. Revolutionary leaders soon realised that frowning on football was self-defeating – it antagonised the popular classes whose support was depended on most.⁴⁸ Football remained the most popular sport in the country. When officials clamped down on organised matches

⁴¹ ‘How does Islam view sport games such as football, basketball etc?’, *Question on Islam*, <http://www.questionsonislam.com/question/it-permissible-play-sports>, Accessed 10 October 2017.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ H. Chehabi, Op. Cit.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ B. Fozooni, Op. Cit., p. 365.

⁴⁶ H. Chehabi, Op. Cit.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 90.

and tournaments, improvised neighbourhood games became more common.⁴⁹ Moreover, the attack on their primary pastime made young men increasingly impatient with enforcement of puritanism. Young Iranians began to vent their frustration at the clamp down on football, seen prominently when mass riots broke out outside the Shahid Shirudi stadium in 1984 when a match was cancelled.⁵⁰ It appeared that the anti-football campaign was in fact driving young Iranians to take part in actions considered far more illicit by religious authorities than the ones the anti-football campaign was seeking to oust. Although the Iranian mullahs did not suddenly abandon their anti-football campaign, the rhetoric attacking football softened. They continued to disapprove of the excitement for which football generated, but began to emphasise that the sport could indeed be played for physical improvement.⁵¹ This was a clear reversal of their previous puritan stance that football was self-indulgent and offered little in the way of physical benefits. The focused post-revolution anti-football campaign appeared to symbolically end when Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa in 1987 permitting the broadcasting of football on television.⁵²

The aftermath of the Iranian revolution demonstrates an occasion where Islamic religious leaders initiated a focused campaign aiming to curb the influence and popularity of football. The Iranian mullahs were primarily inspired by puritan interpretations of the Quran and its teachings on sport. They deemed the sport 'un-Islamic' as it was played and watched for enjoyment rather than for physical wellbeing and preparation for jihad. Although this attack on certain sports is not particularly unique to Iran or Islam, it highlights the complex relationship that certain Middle Eastern religious leaders have had with the region's most popular sport. It presented a particular moment where football was a flash point for debate on wider societal issues such as the extent to which puritan values and interpretations of the Quran are pertinent and enforceable in modern day societies. The short tenure of the anti-football campaign demonstrates that it is often an untenable position to completely oppose a sport with such deep-seated popularity. The Iranian religious leaders realised that

⁴⁹ C. Bromberger, Op. Cit.

⁵⁰ H. Chehabi, Op. Cit.

⁵¹ H. Chehabi, Op. Cit., p. 91.

⁵² F. Foer, *How Football Explains the World: An Unlikely Theory of Globalization* (New York: Random House, 2011), p. 212.

opposition to the sport led to far worse consequences than those that their attack on football was supposed to curtail.

Anti-Football Fatwas: Contemporary Religious Opposition to Football

On 25 August 2005, anonymous Salafi Muslim clerics published a fatwa (religious ruling) in the daily Saudi Arabian *al-Watan* newspaper denouncing the sport of football. Although it was loosely based on a fatwa issued by a radical Saudi Islamist scholar in 2002 banning Muslim youths from playing football, the 2005 fatwa garnered an unprecedented and fierce reaction.⁵³ Crucially, the ruling thrust the issue of whether football is permissible for Muslims into mainstream discourse in the Middle East. It had been well over two decades since the Iranian anti-football campaign, yet religious and secular leaders suddenly found themselves addressing issues like whether Muslims are allowed to watch televised football once again. Given that the ruling coincided with preparations for the 2006 World Cup for the three qualified Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Iran), these debates dominated much of the build up to the tournament.⁵⁴ While the ruling also went on to inspire further fatwas disapproving of the game – every World Cup since has been accompanied by a number of anti-football fatwas from a range of Middle Eastern religious clerics, drawing upon congruent themes. The 2005 fatwa, and the subsequent fatwas that it inspired, are worthy of exploration in detailing another occasion where a number of Islamic religious leaders have attacked the sport of football. The fatwas shed further light on the complex relationship that Islamic religious leaders have with the sport.

Fatwas are legal opinions proclaimed by Islamic religious leaders, ordinarily scholars or clerics, providing Muslims with guidelines and rules to follow in their day-to-day affairs.⁵⁵ They have become increasingly ubiquitous in the Muslim world as a result of growing literacy rates, the rise of the television and the internet, and the expansion in the number of

⁵³ M. Terdman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 315.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 317.

⁵⁵ B. Ibrahim, M. Arifin and S. Abd Rashid, 'The Role of Fatwa and Mufti in Contemporary Muslim Society', *Pertanika Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities*, Vol. 23 (2015), p. 315.

scholars.⁵⁶ Although the religious leader has to go through a formalised process of education and training to be considered a cleric or scholar with the authority to issue fatwas, the process is very fluid and not easily standardised.⁵⁷ Hence, the religious authority of fatwas are frequently questioned, with Muslim states attempting to control the volume and religious jurisdiction of fatwas through their religious ministries.⁵⁸ Accordingly, when analysing fatwas as in this instance, it is imperative to take into consideration the religious authority of the particular cleric or scholar in order to establish the popularity of the religious opinion. Given the sheer number of fatwas issued throughout the Muslim world, and the anonymous nature of the 2005 ruling, it was surprising that it instigated debates around the permissibility of football and set into motion an anti-football campaign.

However, the content of the 2005 fatwa was particularly controversial. It highlighted aspects of why certain Islamic religious leaders disapprove of football. Specifically, the fatwa primarily argued that it is only permissible to play football if the rules are different from those internationally standardised and accepted.⁵⁹ The anonymous cleric instructed fellow Muslims “not to play soccer with four lines [surrounding the field] since this is the way of the non-believers”; whilst “one should not use the terminology established by the non-believers and the polytheists, like: ‘foul’, ‘penalty kick’, ‘corner kick’, ‘goal’ and ‘out of bounds’”.⁶⁰ Furthermore, “one should not set the number [of players] according to the number of players used by the non-believers”; “one should play in your normal clothing...pants and jerseys are not appropriate clothing for Muslims...they are the clothing

⁵⁶ G. Porter, ‘God is in the Rules’, *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/16/opinion/god-is-in-the-rules.html>, Accessed 25 October 2017.

⁵⁷ R. Siegel, ‘Role of the Fatwa in Modern Islam’, *NPR*, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4775646>, Accessed 15 October 2017.

⁵⁸ ‘Fatwas’, *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e646>, Accessed 15 November 2017.

⁵⁹ M. Terdman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 314.

⁶⁰ Anonymous Fatwa August 2005, quoted in ‘Anti-Soccer Fatwas Led Saudi Soccer Players to Join the Jihad in Iraq’, *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, <https://www.memri.org/reports/anti-soccer-fatwas-led-saudi-soccer-players-join-jihad-iraq>, Accessed 10 October 2017.

of non-believers and of the West”; and finally “do not play for forty-five minutes [per half] as this is the practice of the Jews and Christians”.⁶¹

The authors of the 2005 fatwa deem the internationally accepted and standardised rules of football as a challenge to the supremacy of Islamic law. This particular argument set a precedent for further anti-football religious rulings. For instance, a popular Saudi Salafi-jihadi cleric, Suleiman Al-‘Alwan, who has previously been accused of having ties with Al-Qaeda and issuing fatwas permitting terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia, criticised football for similar reasons.⁶² In recognition of the 2005 fatwa, he cited that “there is a serious problem with [football] games, which is refereeing, which follows man-made laws, not Allah’s laws”.⁶³ For these clerics, they see no way to reconcile the authority of football’s rules and its referees with the ultimate authority of Islamic law (specifically sharia). In other words, football’s rules do not originate from Islamic law as set out by Allah in the Islamic scriptures, so therefore need to be updated and changed accordingly. How the specific changes to the rules suggested in the 2005 fatwa bring football’s laws into line with Sharia law is unclear.

The claim in the 2005 fatwa that football violates sharia law provoked widespread criticism and rejection however. Senior Saudi religious and secular leaders waded into the debate, proclaiming that sharia permits playing football under international rules. Sheikh ‘Abd al-Muhsin al-‘Ubaykan, a prominent advisor to the Saudi Minister of Justice, stated that football was indeed permissible under sharia, with terms like ‘foul’ and ‘out’, the touchlines and the referees all acceptable under Islamic law.⁶⁴ Some religious leaders even demanded the prosecution of the authors of the 2005 fatwa for claiming that football contradicted sharia law. The Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz ibn ‘Abdullah al-Shayakh, called on the Saudi religious police to “track down all those involved and prosecute them, in view of the dangers and venom with which they are trying to influence society”.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² ‘Fatwa by Saudi Sheikh: Soccer players are infidels’, *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, <https://www.memri.org/reports/fatwa-saudi-sheikh-soccer-players-are-infidels>, Accessed 12 November 2017.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 316.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 315.

The Mufti went on to further warn Muslims to ignore the fatwa, stating that they should seek out the source and religious authority of those issuing fatwas “so that nobody who is not an expert in these areas will come along and issue a fatwa that will lead him and others astray”.⁶⁶

The desired rule changes in the 2005 fatwa also point to further complexities in religious leader’s opposition to football. In particular, it is clear that the authors of the 2005 fatwa seek to present football as a Western or Judo-Christian creation and enterprise. For example, it is claimed that Muslims should not wear pants and jerseys as this is what the ‘non-believers’ and the ‘West’ wears. While playing for two forty-five minute halves must be avoided as it is “the practice of Jews and Christians”.⁶⁷ As Terdman points out, this altering of the rules appears to be based on a hadith (Prophetic tradition) popular in Salafism and radical Islamism which forbids Muslims from imitating Christians and Jews.⁶⁸ This view that football should be discouraged as it is the domain of the ‘West’ is particularly common in Salafist and radical Islamist fatwas on football. For instance, a subsequent fatwa issued by a Saudi Salafi cleric in 2006 called the World Cup a “cultural invasion from the West” that Muslims should avoid.⁶⁹

Viewing football as ‘Western’ perhaps stems from modern football’s origins in Europe, or the historic dominance of European and South American domestic and international teams. However, whether the sport of football can reasonably be considered ‘Western’ in modern society is itself contentious. As emphasised previously, the sport has been “passionately played and loved” since its introduction at the turn of the twentieth century.⁷⁰ To claim that the game is still ‘Western’ denies a century of football history and

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Anonymous Fatwa August 2005, quoted in ‘Anti-Soccer Fatwas Led Saudi Soccer Players to Join the Jihad in Iraq’, *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, <https://www.memri.org/reports/anti-soccer-fatwas-led-saudi-soccer-players-join-jihad-iraq>, Accessed 10 October 2017.

⁶⁸ M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 314.

⁶⁹ V. Sharma, ‘Which World Cup Teams are Jihadis Rooting for?’, *Vocativ*, <http://www.vocativ.com/culture/sport/world-cup-teams-jihadis-rooting/>, Accessed 28 October 2017.

⁷⁰ A. Raab, Op. Cit., p. 619.

influence in the Middle East. As Alon Raab argues, football in the region “has its own flavour and character” as a result of the region’s unique history, religion, culture and people.⁷¹ Hence, the argument that the sport is purely ‘Western’ often fails to stand true. The aforementioned advisor to the Saudi Minister of Justice concurs, arguing that football may well have emanated from the West, but it is by no means unique to the West anymore.⁷² Accordingly, he emphasised that it is permissible for Muslims to play football through standardised international rules and conventions.⁷³

Aside from the desired rule changes, the 2005 fatwa goes on to highlight further important complexities in the relationship between Islamic religious leaders and football. Namely, it demonstrates that religious leaders from various Islamic schools of thought are seemingly united in believing Muslims should only play football for its physical benefits, and not for enjoyment. The fatwa stated that football must only be played “with the intention of improving your physical fitness for the purpose of fighting jihad for the sake of Allah and preparing for the time when jihad is needed”.⁷⁴ With this, the anonymous Salafi authors are drawing upon the same motivations for disapproving of football as the Islamist leaders after the Iranian revolution. Salafism is an intellectual current within Sunni Islam which holds that the most authentic and ‘true’ Islam is found during the early generations of Muslims, known as the *Salaf*, who were closest in both time and proximity to the Prophet Muhammad.⁷⁵ Crucially in this case, Salafis highlight the Prophet Muhammad’s engagement in sports (wrestling, horseracing and archery) which have certain physical benefits in enabling

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 620.

⁷² M. Terdman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 316.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Anonymous Fatwa August 2005, quoted in ‘Anti-Soccer Fatwas Led Saudi Soccer Players to Join the Jihad in Iraq’, *The Middle East Media Research Institute*, <https://www.memri.org/reports/anti-soccer-fatwas-led-saudi-soccer-players-join-jihad-iraq>, Accessed 10 October 2017.

⁷⁵ S. Hamid and R. Dar, ‘Islamism, Salafism and Jihadism: A Primer’, *The Brookings Institution*, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/07/15/islamism-salafism-and-jihadism-a-primer/>, Accessed 27 October 2017.

readiness for jihad.⁷⁶ Salafists therefore view sports solely as a means to preserve one's physical condition and maintain one's life.⁷⁷

It is not only Salafists who hold this view towards football. The official Saudi Arabian government fatwa website operated by the General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta, echoes the 2005 fatwa in arguing that football must only be played for preserving one's physical health and fitness, while preparing oneself for jihad. Specifically, a fatwa was given in 2006 emphasising that football is only permissible "when sought for help in fighting Kuffar (disbelievers) in jihad".⁷⁸ Saudi Arabia's religious leaders within government are guided by an adherence to the Islamic school of thought Wahhabism. Wahhabis follows the teachings of Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, an eighteenth Century religious leader who advocated reforms to address what he viewed as the deterioration of Islam through widespread *shirk* (associating Allah with others).⁷⁹ Wahhabism and Salafism similarly adopt literalist and puritanical approaches to Islamic theology, leading many to group the two together.⁸⁰ Although an exploration of whether the two groups should indeed be grouped together is beyond the scope of this paper, In the case of their outlook to the sport of football, both Salafis and Wahhabis appear united. Fatwas from Salafi and Wahhabi religious leaders both allow football on the condition that it is played in order to preserve physical health in preparation for jihad, and not for enjoyment purposes.

⁷⁶ 'How does Islam view sport games such as football, basketball etc?', *Question on Islam*, <http://www.questionsonislam.com/question/it-permissible-play-sports>, Accessed 10 October 2017.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ 'Fatwa No. 3323', *The General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta* (Fatwas of the Permanent Committee: Group 1, Vol. 15, Transactions 3), <http://www.alifta.net/Search/ResultDetails.aspx?languagename=en&lang=en&view=result&fatwaNum=&FatwaNumID=&ID=5605&searchScope=7&SearchScopeLevels1=&SearchScopeLevels2=&highLight=1&SearchType=exact&SearchMoesar=false&bookID=&LeftVal=0&RightVal=0&simple=&SearchCriteria=allwords&PagePath=&siteSection=1&searchkeyword=10211111116098097108108#firstKeyWordFound>, Accessed 15 October 2017.

⁷⁹ M. Bin Ali and M. Saiful Alam Shah Bin Sudiman, 'Salafis and Wahhabis: Two Sides of the Same Coin – An Analysis', *Eurasia Review*, <http://www.eurasiareview.com/12102016-salafis-and-wahhabis-two-sides-of-the-same-coin-analysis/>, Accessed 12 October 2017.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Despite these commonalities between contemporary Salafi and Wahhabi clerics and the puritan Islamist leaders who came to power after the Iranian revolution, it would be unwise to overstate the universality of this viewpoint in the Middle East. For instance, when the 2005 fatwa reached Egypt, 'Abd al-Sabur Marzuq (the Egyptian Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs) argued it is inappropriate for one to look towards the Quran for a ruling on football as it is an "athletic activity concerning which no revelation has been given by Allah, and to which the Quran has not referred".⁸¹ While, Sheikh Faisal Mawlawi, the Lebanese deputy chairman of the European Council for Fatwa and Research, argued that one did not have to play football solely for its physical benefits. Rather, it is permissible to play football for enjoyment as "the Prophet Muhammad ordered us to entertain ourselves...he said 'Entertain your hearts, for hearts become blind when they are tired'".⁸²

However, returning to the 2005 fatwa, the claim that football must only be played for its physical benefits has further consequences for the permissibility of football for the anonymous Salafi authors. Specifically, that Muslims are not permitted to watch football:

It is forbidden for groups of youth to gather and watch [football], since if you are gathering for the sake of sports activity and physical fitness, as you claim, why should they be looking at you? You must make them participate [in order to improve] their physical fitness and prepare for jihad.
(Anonymous Fatwa, August 2005)

Hence, the concession that football can be used to maintain physical fitness is immediately countered with the prohibition of watching the sport. Delving deeper into why the anonymous Salafi clerics are seeking to forbid Muslims from watching football, a later quote in the fatwa appears to shed some light: "football is not for passing time or the thrill of so-called victory".⁸³ The authors of the fatwa are emphasising that football should not be played or watched for entertainment.

⁸¹ M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 316.

⁸² M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 319.

⁸³ Anonymous Fatwa August 2005, quoted in 'Anti-Soccer Fatwas Led Saudi Soccer Players to Join the Jihad in Iraq', *The Middle East Media Research Institute*,

This attempt to undermine or forbid enjoyment within football is a running theme throughout much of Islamic religious leader's opposition to the sport. Crucially, the entertainment value of football is seen as a distraction for young Muslims. The vast majority of religious rulings denouncing football in the aftermath of the 2005 fatwa sought to emphasise that football as entertainment was a distraction to Muslims around the world. Specifically, certain religious leaders issued fatwas arguing that football is a distraction from 'Western evils'. For instance, a Kuwaiti radical jihadi-Salafi sheikh with a rising reputation and a significant following, Hamid al-'Ali, issued a fatwa stating that "it is illicit to watch these matches on corrupt TV channels while our nation is decimated night and day by foreign armies".⁸⁴ Another Islamist scholar who signed his name as Abu Haytham, gave an online fatwa:

While our brother in Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan are being massacred in cold blood by the Crusaders and the Jews, our young people will have their eyes riveted on depraved television sets which emit the opium of football to the extent of overdose. (Terdman, 2011, p. 317)

Whilst a June 2006 fatwa by another leading radical Islamist scholar, Abu Basir al-Tartusi, similarly cited the impermissibility of watching the World Cup as "in the day of the opening of the Cup in Germany, billions of people came to the small screens...in this day and time the Zionist Jews bombed civilians".⁸⁵ The World Cup is therefore viewed as distracting Muslims from the 'evils' committed by the West in Afghanistan, Palestine and Iraq. However, 'Western evils' did not stop at the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Some Islamist scholars called for Muslims to boycott the World Cup, calling it the 'Prostitution Cup', claiming that thousands of prostitutes were descending on Germany for the tournament.

<https://www.memri.org/reports/anti-soccer-fatwas-led-saudi-soccer-players-join-jihad-iraq>, Accessed 10 October 2017.

⁸⁴ H. Trabelsi, 'Islamists denounce 'opium of football'', *Mail and Guardian*, <https://mg.co.za/article/2006-06-24-islamists-denounce-opium-of-football>, Accessed 13 October 2017.

⁸⁵ M. Terdman, Op. Cit.

For these scholars, the World Cup is the epitome of Western immorality, and a distraction from Muslims acknowledging 'Western evils'.⁸⁶

Yet not only does the 2006 World Cup distract from 'Western evils', a number of Islamic religious scholars also point to football distracting Muslims from their religious duties. A radical Islamist group posted an online video detailing their own 'World Cup', showing scenes from the 9/11 attacks as well as footage of killing and torture in the Palestinian territories, Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib prison. However the introduction to the video also pointed out that "the World Cup diverts Muslims away from their religious duties".⁸⁷ Additional fatwas, such as one delivered by an anonymous Saudi cleric during the 2006 World Cup, further emphasise this, highlighting the impermissibility of watching the tournament as it "prevents anyone from praying at proper times".⁸⁸ Furthermore, radical Islamic fundamentalist factions within the Saudi Arabian government were so worried that the 2010 World Cup in South Africa would distract Muslims from performing their religious duties, that they rolled out mobile mosques on trucks and prayer mats in front of popular cafes where men gathered to watch the games, hoping to ensure that prayer times were observed.⁸⁹

Hence, a seemingly crucial aspect of numerous religious leaders disapproving of football is epitomised through these fatwas – there appears to be a fear that the immense popularity and far-reaching appeal of the sport of football undermines adherence to their belief system, perhaps even threatening to divide Islam. As Middle East football scholar James Dorsey alludes to, "in a swath of land stretching from Central Asia to the Atlantic coast of Africa, football is the only institution that rivals Islam".⁹⁰ The perceived threat of a sport to religion is not a particularly new idea, or one that is unique to Islam. There is a

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 317.

⁸⁷ H. Trabelsi, Op. Cit.

⁸⁸ 'Al-Hayat Editorial Board Director: Fatwas Banning Soccer Reflect Crisis in Islamic World', *Middle East Media Research Institute*, https://www.memri.org/reports/al-hayat-editorial-board-director-fatwas-banning-soccer-reflect-crisis-islamic-world#_edn1, Accessed 2 November 2017.

⁸⁹ J. Dorsey, 'Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw', p. 1075.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

plethora of literature that finds similarities between sport and religion, with many citing the ritualistic tradition, complement of deities (idolisation of athletes for sport), and a dedicated time and place for worship of both – leading some to hypothesise that both sport and religion are equivalent institutions vying for the hearts and minds of the populace.⁹¹ In religions other than Islam, a narrative of sport competing with religion can also be seen. Among Christian clergymen there are similar concerns given that football fans outnumber churchgoers in several West European nations. The Greek Orthodox Metropolitan Hierotheos (Vlachos) of Nafpatkos warned shortly after the 2010 World Cup in South Africa that football had become a religion that threatened the Church. The extent to which football has replaced religion in many areas of the world remains to be seen and will be continually debated, however it is clear that a number of Islamic religious leaders fear the rise of the world's most popular sport, believing that adherence to their belief system, and Islam in general, will suffer as a result.

Specifically, a number of Pan-Islamist religious clerics view football negatively as they perceive it to have the potential to divide Islam and its believers. Pan-Islamists vehemently believe Muslims belong exclusively to the Islamic faith community, known as *Ummah*, and should be united under one Islamic state.⁹² Yet, as a British Pan-Islamist website argued, football “promotes nationalism as part of a colonial crusader scheme to divide Muslims and cause them to stray from the vision of a unified Islamic identity”.⁹³ They point to the example of France's victory at the 1998 World Cup as evidence. The France team included numerous second-generation Muslim immigrants, including star player Zinedine Zidane. The 1998 victory demonstrated to many French Muslims that integration into French society is possible, and that their French identity can be a source of pride.⁹⁴ For Pan-Islamists, this constituted a challenge to the supremacy of their Muslim identity, and a threat to the unity of the Islamic faith community.

⁹¹ T. Chandler and T Magdalinski, *With God on their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 1.

⁹² A. Malik, 'Why Pan-Islamism is the biggest roadblock for Muslims' integration with modernity', *The Nation*, <http://nation.com.pk/05-Dec-2016/why-pan-islamism-is-the-biggest-roadblock-for-muslims-integration-with-modernity>, Accessed 21 November 2017.

⁹³ J. Dorsey, 'Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw', *Op. Cit.*, p. 1074.

⁹⁴ M. Terdman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 324.

An overwhelming majority of the religious rulings condemning football appear to stem from a belief that football is a threat to the dominance of Islam in the Middle East. This resonates among the majority of Islamic leader denunciations of football. Football's 'Western' and 'un-Islamic' characteristics are often presented as the predominant motivations for opposing football, and should not be dismissed. However, as Dorsey argues, the rationale for attacking football appears to primarily stem from its "potential threat to Islam's political and social control" of Muslims in the Middle East and beyond.⁹⁵ In other words, despite the rationale delivered detailing the many vices of football, the main motivation for Islamic religious leaders opposing football is a result of the perceived threat to Islam's dominance over societies in the Middle East.

It is important to consider that Islamic religious rulings denouncing football often fail to achieve de facto successes on the ground in turning their followers against football. Despite the floods of warnings about football's 'un-Islamic' characteristics, its Western nature, and the distraction it creates from religious duties and 'Western evils', it failed to divert eyes away from football.⁹⁶ For instance, even with the anti-football religious rulings from Salafi and jihadi-Salafi scholars, an analysis of pro-Salafi and jihadi-Salafi Facebook pages during the 2014 World Cup suggested football's popularity among these groups was flourishing. The Facebook users on these pages shared their preferred teams in the tournament in their droves. While some even exulted in triumph over 'the crusaders' when Mexico defeated Iran and heavily criticised the Saudi Arabian team following their 0-4 loss to Ukraine.⁹⁷

Closely connected to this, it appears that many of the fatwas struggle to instigate a change in policy towards football at state level. Despite the religious authority of the religious leader denouncing football, rarely have Middle Eastern states enacted policies seeking to curb the influence of football. For instance, whilst the official fatwa website of Saudi Arabia, run by the *General Presidency of Scholarly Research and Ifta*, effectively

⁹⁵ N. Brookes, Op. Cit.

⁹⁶ H. Trabelsi, Op. Cit.

⁹⁷ M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 318.

denounced playing football for enjoyment, the Saudi government has consistently ignored this ruling.⁹⁸ In fact, the Saudi government have invested fortunes in promoting their national teams and managed to recruit their loyal Islamic institutions to support it.⁹⁹

Further still, despite some religious leaders within a particular Islamic school of thought denouncing football, it would be erroneous to hypothesise that all scholars and believers within that particular Islamic faction also disapprove of the sport. For example, the sheer popularity of the game in the Muslim world has prevented a number of Salafi, Islamist and puritan Muslim clerics from also admonishing the sport of football. A number of Islamist scholars in Saudi Arabia issued fatwas allowing Imams to delay Friday noon prayers due to clashes with football matches “but within the due time specified for the prayer in a way that does not make people perform it after its due time”.¹⁰⁰ Therefore it can be observed that a number of Islamist religious leaders either do not see the popularity of football as being a threat to the adherence to Islam. Or at the very least they are willing to compromise on the issue of football given the sport’s immense popularity among Muslims around the world.

However, an Islamist Professor at a University in Cairo who also allowed imams of mosques to delay performing Friday prayers, references another motivation for refusing to denounce football. He stated that “it is an obvious sin to delay Friday prayers and congregational prayers from its due time, however, for the sake of making it easy for people and for the sake of preserving unity among Muslims, it is allowed for an imam of a mosque to delay performing Friday prayers”.¹⁰¹ Hence, this displays that certain Islamist religious leaders even view football as beneficial in the interest of maintaining Muslim unity. Just as the revolutionary Islamist leaders of the Iranian revolution realised that opposing football was self-defeating, this Islamist Professor acknowledges that opposing football may provoke disunity. Ironically, this is the same Islamic disunity that the opposition to football was trying to curtail in the first place.

⁹⁸ J. Dorsey, ‘A Rare Saudi-Iranian Détente: No Soccer, Please!’, *The Globalist*, <https://www.theglobalist.com/saudi-arabia-islam-iran-soccer-religion/>, Accessed 13 November 2017.

⁹⁹ M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 324.

¹⁰⁰ M. Terdman, Op. Cit., p. 320.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

The analysis of the 2005 fatwa, and subsequent fatwas that it inspired, demonstrate the complex and multifaceted relationship that a number of Islamic leaders have towards football. There are countless doctrinal opinions denouncing the region's most popular sport from various factions of Islam. Some cite football's 'un-Islamic' characteristics, claiming that the Quran directly forbids playing or watching the sport for enjoyment or entertainment. Others see it as a Western invasion of Arab and Muslim worlds, while a number argue football is a distraction for Muslims from their religious duties and from 'Western evils'. Despite the claims that football is 'un-Islamic' is a common feature among Salafi, Wahhabi and puritan Muslim critiques of the game, the vast majority of rulings implicitly or explicitly allude to the potential threat football poses to the social and political control of Islam in the Middle East. Irrespective of what branch the religious leader belongs to, they see football as a rival to Islam as it is one of the few things that can evoke the deep-seated passion and devotion in the region that religion does.¹⁰²

However, rulings denouncing football achieve limited de facto success in curtailing the popularity and influence of football. The popularity of the game has undoubtedly failed to subside. The recent qualifications of the Egyptian and Iranian national teams to the 2018 World Cup in Russia sparked wild celebrations on the streets of Cairo and Tehran respectively. While a recent *YouGov* poll in Saudi Arabia and Egypt indicated that well over half of Saudis and Egyptians were 'excited' and 'elated' about their team's qualifications.¹⁰³ Additionally, unlike the Iranian mullah during the 1979 revolution, it must be noted that the anti-football rulings often fail to influence government policies towards football, with governments increasingly viewing football as a source of soft power resource acquisition. Furthermore, the condemnation of football is often not ubiquitous among religious leaders of a particular branch of Islam, with many in fact even issuing rulings allowing Friday prayers

¹⁰² J. Dorsey, 'A Rare Saudi-Iranian Détente: No Soccer, Please!', *The Globalist*, <https://www.theglobalist.com/saudi-arabia-islam-iran-soccer-religion/>, Accessed 13 November 2017.

¹⁰³ D. Taylor, 'How excited Saudi and Egyptian football fans are about World Cup qualification – and what it means for business', *SMG YouGov Insight*, <http://www.smg-insight.com/how-excited-saudi-and-egyptian-football-fans-are-about-world-cup-qualification-and-what-it-means-for-business/>, Accessed 18 November 2017.

to be delayed in order to watch matches. Some religious leaders even acknowledge that opposing football can be self-defeating – believing that denouncing football will initiate divisions with Islam.

Straddling the Fence: Islamic State and Football

Despite these religious rulings failing to make an impact in shaping government policy and in encouraging Muslims to turn their backs on football, the fatwas do have significant wider consequences for the region. Namely, the fatwas that denounce football guide jihadist groups like Islamic State in their opposition of football. By examining jihadist group interactions with the region's most popular sport, one observes the anti-football fatwas in action. Yet, it also highlights that issues affecting the success of the anti-football fatwas – namely an inability to curb the popularity of football and the self-defeating aspects of opposing football – are echoed once again. Islamic State's straddling of the fence in its stance to football demonstrate the difficulties of opposing the region's most popular sport.

Islamic State, the group who rose to international prominence when they seized swathes of land in Syria and Iraq in 2014, has consistently attacked the sport of football.¹⁰⁴ Primarily, this has been seen through the group's encouragement of terror attacks on football stadia around the world. For instance, the Islamic State's capture of territory in Northern Iraq in June 2015 was preceded by a bombing campaign focusing heavily on besieging football facilities in the region.¹⁰⁵ The group have also inspired attacks – with varying success – on football stadia, fans and players in western Europe. This was seen recently and most prominently in 2015 at the France's national stadium, the Stade de France, when three suicide bombers detonated their vests after being denied access to the

¹⁰⁴ J. Dorsey, 'Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw', p. 1070.

¹⁰⁵ J. Austin, 'Bomb found near Parc des Princes hours before Paris Saint-Germain were due to play Bordeaux' *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/football/news-and-comment/bomb-terrorist-attack-psg-paris-saint-germain-parc-des-princes-a7980386.html>, Accessed 15 October 2017; and J. Dorsey, 'Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw', p. 1070.

stadium during an international friendly match.¹⁰⁶ German police said that they foiled a similar Islamic State plot against a stadium in Hannover hours before the German national team were due to take to the field just days after the Stade de France attack.¹⁰⁷ While French police foiled a 2017 plot at the Parc des Princes stadium in Paris, and Kosovo police claimed to unearth a plot to attack the Israeli team in Albania in 2016.¹⁰⁸

This encouragement of attacks on stadia is not particularly surprising. The visible and densely packed venues hosting football matches have long been in the crosshairs of jihadist terrorist organisations.¹⁰⁹ Boko Haram regularly targeted venues in Nigeria where fans gathered to watch the 2014 World Cup, seeking to emulate Al-Shabaab (an East African affiliate of Al-Qaeda) who targeted fans in Uganda watching the 2010 World Cup.¹¹⁰ While Al-Qaeda has a long history of planning attacks on football stadia – a plot to target a match between England and Tunisia in Marseille during the 1998 World Cup was foiled, and a dissident Saudi military officer was arrested for being part of an Al-Qaeda plot to target the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.¹¹¹ High-profile matches attracting worldwide audiences are ideal targets for terrorists seeking to publicise their group's aims to a vast audience. The crowded arenas present an opportunity to maximise the number of victims and hence magnify the drama and shock of an attack, while also fostering fear in a place many go to

¹⁰⁶ A. Martinez, 'Why the Paris terrorists targeted soccer', *Houston Chronicle*, [http://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters/article/Why-the-Paris-terrorists-targeted-soccer-6635979.php\[AQ23\]](http://www.houstonchronicle.com/local/gray-matters/article/Why-the-Paris-terrorists-targeted-soccer-6635979.php[AQ23]), Accessed 5 October 2017.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ 'Kosovo Police: we foiled Islamic State attacks, including on Israel football team', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2016/nov/17/kosovo-police-islamic-state-israel-football-team>, Accessed 21 October 2017.

¹⁰⁹ R. Schinke, K. McGannon, R. Busanich, and Y. Ge, 'A Commentary on Sport and Terrorism From the Vantage of Sport Psychology', *American Behavioral Scientist Journal*, Vol. 60 No. 9 (2016), p 1116–1131

¹¹⁰ J. Dorsey, 'Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw', p. 1071.

¹¹¹ A. Robinson, *Terror on the Pitch: How Bin Laden Targeted Beckham and the England Football Team* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2002), p. 154; and 'Iraq Says it Uncovered Al Qaeda Plot on World Cup', *Fox News*, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2010/05/17/iraq-says-uncovered-al-qaeda-plot-world-cup.html>, Accessed 27 October 2017.

enjoy themselves, relax and feel safe.¹¹² As Schinke puts it “what better place for a terrorist to make a political or ideological statement?”¹¹³

However, the group’s policy of attacking football also has theological underpinnings. Specifically, as James Dorsey claims, Islamic State are “strengthened in their resolve” by the anti-football fatwas issued by religious leaders.¹¹⁴ The fatwas denouncing football are frequently circulated and used to justify terror attacks on football stadia on jihadist forums popular with supporters of the group.¹¹⁵ Similarly, a letter addressed to football’s world governance body (FIFA) which threatened to attack the 2022 World Cup in Qatar also drew inspiration from the anti-football fatwas. The letter called football a “corruption and diversion from Islam in the land of the Muslims”, alluding to the religious rulings which denounced football as a Western or Judo-Christian import which distracts from religious obligations.¹¹⁶

Islamic State’s adherence to the anti-football fatwas is viewed once again through further examination of their relationship with football. The group’s attacks on football go beyond targeting football stadia for terror attacks. The group have banned watching football, closed football facilities and stadiums, and prohibited wearing football jerseys throughout its territories.¹¹⁷ In early 2015, thirteen teenage boys were publicly executed in the Syrian city of Raqqa, for watching a match between Jordan and Iraq.¹¹⁸ While crowds in Raqqa in 2016 were forced to attend the public execution of four players of the city’s

¹¹² Y. Galily, M. Yarchi, I. Tamir, T. Samuel-Arzan, ‘The Boston Game and the ISIS Match: Terrorism, Media, and Sport’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 60 No. 9 (2016), p. 1059.

¹¹³ R. Schinke, K. McGannon, R. Busanich, and Y. Ge, Op. Cit., p. 1123.

¹¹⁴ J. Dorsey, ‘Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw’, p. 1072.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 1073.

¹¹⁶ Letter originally posted on Islamic State’s forum alplatformmedia.com, quoted in N. Binshtok, ‘ISIS to FIFA: Cancel the World Cup or We’ll Bomb it’, *Vocativ*, <http://www.vocativ.com/culture/religion/isis-tells-fifa-cancel-qatari-world-cup-face-scuds/index.html>, Accessed 15 October 2017.

¹¹⁷ J. Dorsey, ‘Soccer Pitches: An Emerging Battleground for Control of Iraq’, *Huffington Post*, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-dorsey/soccer-pitches-an-emergin_b_5593623.html, Accessed 10 October 2017.

¹¹⁸ Y. Steinbuch and Jamie Schram, “ISIS executes 13 teens for watching soccer”, *New York Post*, <https://nypost.com/2015/01/19/isis-executes-13-teens-for-watching-soccer/>, Accessed 15 October 2017.

disbanded Al Shabab SC football team.¹¹⁹ These bans on football have never been formalised in an official ruling. However, the group propagates these bans “in the street, in mosques, and at media points”, with the anti-football fatwas regularly cited in order to provide theological justification.¹²⁰ This was exemplified in the previously occupied Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor, where Islamic State leaders drew directly upon the anonymous 2005 fatwa. The group’s leaders outlawed referees and the international laws of the game as they are a “threat to the supremacy of Allah’s commands”, directly implementing the rule changes of the 2005 fatwa.¹²¹

Despite this, Islamic State’s relationship with football also echoes a number of issues that religious leaders have when denouncing the sport of football through fatwas. For instance, much in the way that the Islamic religious leaders failed to turn Muslims away from the sport through their rulings, Islamic State fail to curb the popularity of the game in their territories. When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself caliph of the Islamic State in June 2015, the Great Mosque in Mosul was packed with men wearing football jerseys.¹²² Similarly, the group seem unable to undermine the popularity of the sport among foreign jihadists from Europe or the US who regularly watch matches and play football video games in their houses.¹²³ As a former Raqqa resident stated, “Islamic State fundamentally despises the game; yet they can’t deny that is popular in its ranks and in the territory it governs”.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ J. Dorsey, ‘Jihad v Football: Islamic State’s love-hate relationship with the World Game’, *Asian Football Business Review*, <http://www.asianfootballbusiness.com/2016/07/jihad-football-soccer-terrorism.html>, Accessed 26 October 2017.

¹²⁰ Q. Müller, ‘How football survives on Islamic State Turf’, *Vice Sports*, https://sports.vice.com/en_us/article/d7mp8x/how-football-survives-on-islamic-states-turf, Accessed 5 November 2017.

¹²¹ L. Dearden, ‘Isis bans football referees in Syria because they enforce 'laws of Fifa not Sharia'’, *The Independent*, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-bans-football-referees-fifa-sharia-law-syria-commands-allah-a7218466.html>, Accessed 14 October 2017.

¹²² J. Dorsey, ‘Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw’, p. 1071.

¹²³ Q. Müller, Op. Cit.

¹²⁴ J. Dorsey, ‘Jihad v Football: Islamic State’s love-hate relationship with the World Game’, *Asian Football Business Review*, <http://www.asianfootballbusiness.com/2016/07/jihad-football-soccer-terrorism.html>, Accessed 26 October 2017.

Furthermore, the sport is seemingly an unresolved dilemma for Islamic State. Just as religious leaders during the Iranian Revolution realised that their opposition to football was damaging and that football has its benefits, Islamic State acknowledge the utility of football for their cause. Specifically, the group have realised that football can be a useful recruitment tool. For instance, a video was released featuring an individual claimed to be former French international footballer, Lassana Diarra. The individual, who turned out to be a Portuguese jihadist with a slight resemblance to Diarra, encouraged Muslim football fans to leave everything behind and join jihad as he had done.¹²⁵ A further video released by the group in 2015 showed Islamic State militants playing football with children on the streets of Raqqa in a bid to convey the supposed support for the group from the general populace.¹²⁶

Islamic State also see football as “perfect for the creation and sustenance of strong and cohesive jihadist groups” as the informal environments of football teams can foster trust, fellowship, and camaraderie.¹²⁷ As Atran argues in his exploration of the psychology behind radicalisation, football creates action-orientated groups of youths who become a “bunch of buddies” or “band of brothers” in a glorious cause. These groups are particularly adept at self-radicalising and expanding informal networks of individuals sympathetic to Islamic State’s cause.¹²⁸ Islamic State has therefore sought to exploit groups of footballers for recruitment. Abu Otaiba, the nom du guerre of a self-taught imam and Islamic State recruiter in Jordan, outlined the policy of using football to attract young recruits. He stated that “we take them to farms, or private homes...there we discuss and we organise football

¹²⁵ L. Berman, “Arsenal player’ in Syria video IDed’, *The Times of Israel*, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/arsenal-player-in-syria-video-ided/>, Accessed 18 November 2017.

¹²⁶ J. Dorsey, ‘The ‘Boytrap’: When the Islamic State goes to play soccer’, *The Globalist*, <https://www.theglobalist.com/islamic-state-is-boys-recruitment-soccer-football-terrorism-middle-east/>, Accessed 12 November 2017.

¹²⁷ R. Schinke, K. McGannon, R. Busanich, and Y. Ge, Op. Cit., p. 1125; and J. Dorsey, ‘Soccer Versus Jihad: A Draw’, p. 1070.

¹²⁸ S. Atran, ‘Who Becomes a Terrorist Today?’, *Perspectives on Terrorism Journal*, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/35/html>, Accessed 23 October 2017.

games to bring them closer to us".¹²⁹ Accordingly, there are numerous recent examples of groups of footballers who have been recruited by the group. For instance, Muhammad Enwazi, known as Jihadi John, was one of several members of a football team who travelled to Syria to the territories of Islamic State for 'jihad'.¹³⁰ While in Russia, authorities in arrested three men on charges of plotting to blow up a high speed railway linking Moscow and St Petersburg, who all played in the same football team together.¹³¹

Crucially, the exploration of Islamic State's relationship with football demonstrates the anti-football fatwas in action. Despite not being able to encourage governments and the wider Muslim populace to turn their backs on football, the fatwas provide the theological underpinnings of the jihadist group's assault on the game. Islamic State seek to ban watching football as it is a Western creation designed to distract Muslims from religious obligations. While in another case they have changed the rules of the game in its territories as the rules are perceived to challenge the supremacy of sharia law. Hence, the group's policies towards the game heavily stem from the anonymous 2005 fatwa, and the subsequent rulings it inspired. However, Islamic State's relationship with football experiences similar issues to the religious leaders who issued fatwas denouncing the game – it similarly struggles to effectively curb the game's popularity, while there is also a realisation that opposing football is damaging and the sport in fact has specific benefits for its cause. These issues lead to the group straddling the fence, seemingly opposing the game, but using it when it suits. Football remains an unresolved dilemma for religious leaders and jihadist groups who seek to oppose football.

¹²⁹ J. Dorsey, 'The 'Boytrap': When the Islamic State goes to play soccer', *The Globalist*, <https://www.theglobalist.com/islamic-state-is-boys-recruitment-soccer-football-terrorism-middle-east/>, Accessed 12 November 2017.

¹³⁰ A. Topping, 'Who is Muhammad Enwazi? From shy, football-loving boy to ISIS killer', *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/mar/02/who-is-mohammed-emwazi-from-lovely-boy-to-islamic-state-executioner>, Accessed 2 November 2017.

¹³¹ J. Dorsey, 'Syrian jihadists employ soccer as propaganda and recruitment tool', *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.co.uk/2014/04/syrian-jihadists-employ-soccer-as.html>. Accessed 27 October 2017.

Conclusions

Since its introduction in the late nineteenth century, football has played an important role in the Middle East. As in the rest of the world, people often turn to football to keep their minds off the difficulties of day-to-day life, to express pride and identity, or to voice dissent, enact resistance and demand reforms.¹³² Not only is it important for the people, but wealthy Middle Eastern states increasingly view the sport as a vital soft power and financial opportunity. Gulf states invest heavily in the game around the world, and seek to host important football tournaments – such as the 2022 World Cup in Qatar.

Despite the sport's central role in the Middle East, the region's dominant religion has had a particularly complicated relationship with football. A number of Islamic religious leaders have frequently attempted to dissuade Muslims from playing and watching the sport. Even though the sport's introduction to the region sparked a backlash from religious leaders in Iran and Turkey, the first focused and far-reaching campaign seeking to curb the popularity and influence of football was seen in the aftermath of the Iranian revolution. The revolutionary Islamist leaders of the revolution drew upon puritan interpretations of the Quran and its teachings on sport, deeming football 'un-Islamic' as it was played and watched for enjoyment rather than for physical wellbeing and preparation for jihad. Football was denounced in the government's official media channels, while football fields were closed and matches were cancelled on the flimsiest of pretexts. However, the Iranian authorities soon realised that opposing the sport was self-defeating. Muslim youths increasingly resented the puritanical influence on Iranian society, with many venting their frustrations outside stadiums where matches had been cancelled. Although ultimately futile, the Iranian anti-football campaign exemplifies football's role as a flash point for contention in the region, and the complexities in Islamic opposition to football.

Over two decades later, the publishing of a fatwa by anonymous Salafi scholars in 2005 sparked another occasion where Islamic religious leaders heavily denounced football. The fatwa was particularly controversial, arguing that football is only permissible if it is

¹³² M. Terdman, *Op. Cit.*, p. 323.

played in order to preserve one's physical fitness. The fatwas also forbids watching the sport, and playing the sport by the internationally accepted rules. The fatwa sparked numerous further rulings denouncing football from scholars and clerics from a variety of branches of Islam. Some drew upon football's 'un-Islamic' characteristics once again, claiming that the Quran directly forbids playing or watching the sport for enjoyment or entertainment. This was a particularly common feature among Salafi, Wahhabi and puritan Muslim critiques of the game, who interpret the Quran as advocating engagement in sports (wrestling, horseracing and archery) which have certain physical benefits in enabling readiness for jihad. However, the vast majority of fatwas across the spectrum of Islam's schools of thought alluded to football as a distraction for Muslims from their religious duties and from 'Western evils'. This referenced the potential threat football poses to the social and political control of Islam in the Middle East. The religious leaders see football as a rival to Islam as it is one of the few things that can evoke the deep-seated passion and devotion that religion does.

However, these rulings achieved limited success in curtailing the popularity and influence of football. Unlike the Iranian mullahs during the 1979 revolution, the anti-football rulings after 2005 failed to influence government policies towards football. For instance, even though the official government fatwa website of Saudi Arabia sought to prohibit the watching and playing of football as entertainment, the Saudi government have invested heavily in their national team. Not only this, but the anti-football rulings clearly failed to curb the popularity of the game. Victories for the Iranian and Egyptian national teams spark wild celebrations on the streets, while the major European teams have hundreds of supporters clubs in the region. Further still, the condemnation of football is often not ubiquitous among religious leaders of a particular branch of Islam, with many in fact even issuing rulings allowing Friday prayers to be delayed in order to watch matches. Similar to the Iranian anti-football campaign after the revolution, some religious leaders see denouncing football as self-defeating. They view denouncing football as a risk as it has the potential to alienate a portion of their support base

Despite the undoubted failures of the anti-football fatwas achieving de facto successes in curbing the popularity of football, they do have a wider societal impact. The

opposition to football from Islamic religious leaders provides jihadist groups like Islamic State with the theological underpinnings for attacks on the football. The fatwas are regularly circulated on online forums popular with supporters of Islamic State, and are used to encourage and justify attacks on football stadia around the world. While specific Islamic State policies like the prohibition of watching matches on television in its territories, and forbidding the use of the internationally accepted laws of the game, point heavily to a reliance on the series of religious rulings denouncing football after 2005.

However, Islamic State's relationship with football echoes many of the issues that prevent religious leaders from achieving de facto successes when denouncing football. The terror group similarly struggles to effectively curb the game's popularity. For instance, when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared himself the Caliph of Islamic State, the Grand Mosque in Mosul was full of men wearing European football jerseys. The group also seem to realise that opposing football is damaging and the sport in fact has specific benefits for its cause. Specifically, the group acknowledges the recruitment potential of football. They seek to encourage football fans to travel to their territories by using football in propaganda videos. While they also seek to recruit individuals in football teams. These issues lead to the group straddling the fence, opposing the game in rhetoric and many policies, however using it for its benefits when it is suited. Football remains an unresolved dilemma for religious leaders and jihadist groups who seek to oppose football.

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