

# COMMENTARY

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## **North African Soccer Pitches Return as Venues for Anti-Government Protests**

**James M. Dorsey**

**Nanyang Technological University, Singapore**

A series of incidents ranging from the killing of a player to the raising of the flag of the Islamic State, the militant jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, to the arrest of militant Egyptian fans signals the return of North African soccer pitches as venues for anti-government protests.

The incidents reflect mounting anger and frustration among North African youth who have few if any social and economic prospects. They occurred three years after militant soccer fans played key roles in forcing Egyptian and Tunisian presidents Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abdeine Ben Ali to resign after 30 years in office. They also call into question Algerian efforts to contain soccer protests by allowing supporters to chant anti-government slogans in stadia as long as they refrained from taking their protests into the streets.

The killing in late August of Albert Dominique Ebossé Bodjongo Dika, a 25-year old Cameroonian, who played for Algerian club JS Kabylie (JSK), however sent shock waves through African soccer. Ebosse was hit by a rock believed to have been thrown by a JSK supporter upset that his team had lost a match.

Hamza Bencherif, a midfielder and friend of Ebosse, told the BBC's World Football that Algerian players ran risks whenever they entered the pitch. "Every time we lose a game, (there are) some rocks... Death is not far when a risk like that is taken... It's hard to see what (the soccer authorities) can do because they allow so much freedom in the way the stadiums are controlled. If they continue that way there is absolutely nothing they can do," Bencherif said referring to the government's hands-off approach to violence and protest in Algerian stadia.

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Dozens of people, including a player, were injured last year when supporters of Jeunesse Sportive de la Saoura (JSS) stormed the pitch during a premier league match against Algiers-based Union Sportive de la Médina d'El Harrach (USM). The incident followed a massive brawl between players and between fans after a Libya-Algeria Africa Cup of Nations qualifier. Seven fans were killed in the last five years in soccer-related violence and more than 2,700 wounded, according to Algerian statistics.

“Violence in Algeria has become ordinary and banal. Hogra, the word Algerian use for the government’s perceived contempt for ordinary citizens, has planted a sickness in Algerian society. People feel that the only way to get anything done is to have connections or threaten the peace. It is a system where hogra and social injustice rule. Social violence has become the preferred mode of communication between the citizen and the republic — today in our country everything is obtained through a riot,” psychologist Mahmoud Boudarene told the Associated Press.

The concept of hogra is not exclusive to Algeria. Hamza Belrhouate, the brother of Mouad Belrhouate, a Moroccan rapper better known as El Haqed or The Enraged, described in an interview with blogger Zineb Belmkaddem, the re-arrest in May of the musician at a soccer match in Casablanca as “the pinnacle of hogra. They make me hate my life.”

It was the third time El Haqed was arrested since he rose to prominence during anti-government protests in 2011 with a song entitled Stop the Silence that denounced the government’s monopolization of key industries and crackdown on dissent and a second song comparing police to dogs. El Haqed was sentenced in July to four months in prison on charges of buying black market tickets to the match, public drunkenness and assaulting a police officer.

Ebosse’s death that sparked a brief suspension of Algerian soccer with its almost a century-old history as a platform of protest and resistance and the closure of the JSK stadium pending an investigation into the incident is likely to force authorities to crack down on soccer violence. A 2007 diplomatic cable sent by the US embassy in Algiers and disclosed by Wikileaks linked a soccer protest in the desert city of Boussaada to demonstrations in the western port city of Oran sparked by the publication of a highly contentious list of government housing recipients. The cable warned that “this kind of disturbance has become commonplace, and appears likely to remain so unless the government offers diversions other than soccer and improves the quality of life of its citizens.”

Tunisian authorities have delayed last month’s start of the professional soccer league for unidentified security reasons even though it has largely been played behind closed doors without spectators since the overthrow of Ben Ali in a bid to prevent the pitch from re-emerging as a protest venue. A picture of a flag of the Islamic State, the militant jihadist group that controls a swath of Syria and Iraq, being raised at a Tunisian soccer match circulated on the Internet shortly

after the postponement of the league. It was not immediately clear at what match and when the incident occurred.

A Cairo prosecutor last weekend ordered the remanding in prison for 15 days of 36 members of the Ultras White Knights (UWK), the militant, street battle-hardened support group of storied Cairo club Al Zamalek SC on charges of breaking Egypt's draconic anti-protest law, belonging to a group opposed to the law and the constitution, creating chaos, damaging public and private property, interrupting traffic and illegal possession of firearms. Police denied UWK assertions that the parents of some of their members had been detained to force their children to surrender themselves.

The fans were detained after clashing with police during a protest against the arrest of UWK members on charges of having attempted to assassinate club president Mortada Mansour in an incident on 17 August in which two people accompanying him as he left Zamalek's premises were injured by gunshots. Mortada had earlier banned UWK members from the club premises. UWK has denied the allegation.

Tension between Mortada and the fans erupted because of the club president's support for a more than two-year old ban on spectators attending soccer matches. The ban was imposed in February 2012 after 74 supporters of Zamalek arch rival Al Ahli SC were killed in a soccer brawl in Port Said that many believe that the military and security forces had a hand. The sentencing last year in which 21 supporters of Port Said's Al Masri SC were sentenced to death for their part in the incident sparked a popular revolt in cities along the Suez Canal and mass protests in Cairo.

The upcoming retrial of the case is likely to become another flashpoint. A further flashpoint could emerge on 10 September during the African Cup of Nations qualifier between Egypt and Tunisia after the Egyptian interior ministry decided that the spectator ban would be lifted for that one game.

UWK, which played a key role in the toppling of Mubarak and subsequent protests against the military, has demanded Mortada's resignation. A recent UWK song accused Mortada of being a stooge of the regime of general-turned-president Abdel Fattah Al Sisi. In a blowback to the walk-up to Mubarak's downfall and the subsequent anti-military protests, UWK said last week on its Facebook page: "The truth is, we took the streets because we cannot be quiet in the face of injustice."

**Note:** This article was originally published in the blog, **The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer** and has been reproduced with the author's permission. Web link: <http://mideastsoccer.blogspot.in/2014/09/north-african-soccer-pitches-return-as.html>

*James M. Dorsey is a Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, co-director of the Institute of Fan Culture of the University of Würzburg, and the author of the blog, The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer. Email: [jmdorsey@questfze.com](mailto:jmdorsey@questfze.com)*

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