

**SPORT
AND GEOPOLITICS
PROGRAMME**

FOOTBALL, DIPLOMACY AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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GEOSTRATEGIC SPORTS OBSERVATORY



One year ago, the 32nd edition of the Africa Cup of Nations (AFCON) debuted in Egypt, culminating in Algeria's victory over Senegal on July 19th, 2019.

ON SPORT DIPLOMACY AND MEGA-SPORTING EVENTS IN AFRICA

For the first time, the biennial competition was held during the summer with a total of 24 participating national teams. AFCON, the most popular sporting event of the region and among the most important football competitions, has been gaining popularity worldwide with, for example, the British broadcaster BBC's increase coverage to 13 languages for the 2019 edition and its finale's high audience scores in France where it was followed by 1.6 million viewers.

IRIS: What explains AFCON's increasing global popularity?

MAHFOUD AMARA: Starting from 1980s and 1990s, the internationalisation of African football first occurred thanks to the migration of African footballers from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe to play in top European leagues. In 1998, the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) increased the number of represented African teams from three to five in the World Cup, giving African football more international exposure. This has extended lately to North America, Asia and even the Asian subcontinent, with the emergence and development of football in countries like India, Vietnam, and, of course, China.

The increasing presence of football academies of top European clubs in Africa attracting young talents to play in Europe (e.g. Ivory Coast and Ghana) also contributes to the rising popularity of African football and its competitions. More lately, the reverse migration of Europeans of African descent selected to play for the national team of their country of origin increased the level of AFCON and other competitions between African countries. These have all contributed to the globalisation — or glocalisation — of African football.

IRIS: Mega-sporting events bring long-term touristic, economic and social benefits for host countries (EPRS, 2014). Cameroon's bid was originally chosen to host the 2019 AFCON but, due to the lack of infrastructure and insecurity, the tournament was eventually held in Egypt. The Pan-Arab Games¹, on the other hand, have not been held since 2011 despite recent failed attempts to restart the competition is supposed to take place every four years. This year, the Basketball Africa League's (BAL) inaugural season was due to start in March, but was postponed due to the coronavirus crisis. In other words, mega-sporting events' organisation has suffered from political instability and sanitary crises.

MAHFOUD AMARA: Indeed, there are discrepancies between countries in Africa with regards to infrastructure and other facilities. Some countries struggle more than others as there is a difference between North and South Africa, East and West. Before Covid-19, Morocco had to pull out of hosting the 2015 AFCON tournament due to the Ebola epidemic, with Equatorial Guinea stepping in at short notice to stage it.

The Pan-Arab Games were last held in Doha in 2011. It was interesting from a geopolitical point of view as the so-called Arab Spring was toppling a number of Arab leaders (Hosni Mubarak, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Muammar Gaddafi, Ali Abdullah Saleh). Syria, suspended from the Arab League over political violence, did not participate in the tournament. Libya participated for the first time with a new flag.

Since then, the region entered in a cycle of political instability and conflict with events in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Iraq and political tensions between Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, supported by Egypt, on the one hand, and Qatar, on the other hand. Recently, protests in Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, and Algeria led to more demonstrations to demand profound change politically, economically and socially, while the occupied Palestinian territory and besieged Gaza has been an ongoing source of regional tension for decades. Notwithstanding, the devastating effect on the region of years of terrorism and counterterrorism must also be considered.

¹ This event was organised by the Union of Arab National Olympic Committees, thus involving Arab-majority countries in Africa and the Middle East.

IRIS: In light of the organisation of mega-sporting events on African soil, and particularly with the upcoming BAL, is there a regional sport diplomacy in place in Africa? What is the role of sport diplomacy in African international relations?

MAHFOUD AMARA: As in other parts of the world, sport diplomacy plays an important role. In relation to basketball, American embassies in Africa play a significant role and are involved in different aid programs with participation of African NBA players, as well as African American stars.

China has also been active in its diplomacy through sport in Africa with the building of new sport facilities and arenas, presented as gifts from China to the people of Africa. Indeed, China has benefited from the economic boom in some African countries and invested in massive projects in construction, roads and transportation as well as the implementation of Chinese factories to benefit from raw material in place (hence reducing the cost of import).

African leaders have been using sport for their own public relations and prestige. I remember the 2010 FIFA World Cup qualifying game between Algeria and Egypt, which was held in Sudan, and whose winner would be the only country to represent the Arab World in the competition. The former Sudanese President, Omar Al-Bachir, used it to break his international isolation following the International Criminal Court's warrant to arrest him for crimes against humanity. Similarly, the match was used by both political establishment in Egypt and in Algeria for political gains, respectively to promote Hosni Mubarak's son as the future leader of Egypt and to consolidate Abdelaziz Bouteflika's power.

For South Africa, which was banned from participating in Olympic Games and other major sports competitions under its apartheid regime until the early 1990s, hosting sports events such as the AFCON and the Rugby and FIFA World Cups played an important role for the branding of post-apartheid South Africa.

IRIS: In terms of national sport diplomacy, we can think of South Africa and, more recently, of Rwanda. What are other relevant examples of African and Middle Eastern countries' sport diplomacies and what are their particularities?

MAHFOUD AMARA: As I am more familiar with North Africa, I would first mention Tunisia and its strategy from its early years of independence to develop elite sport, and to hosting regional games, including the Mediterranean games. Morocco has promoted itself as an open and tolerant sport nation through repetitive bids to hosting the FIFA World Cup and thanks to the significant impact of track and field, and to lesser extent tennis. As of Algeria, its qualification to the 2010 and 2014 FIFA World Cups allowed for Bouteflika's era to be branded as a national reconciliation between Algerians after more than a decade of political violence.

The hosting of the 2019 AFCON coincided with the return of Egypt under General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi's leadership to the African Union after its suspension over the military coup against elected President Mohammed Morsi. Egypt was elected as chair of the African Union Assembly of Heads of State and Government for a one-year term, in 2019. It was an important moment for Egypt to host the competition after few years of isolation, and to repositioning the country under General Sisi's rule as a leading and influential country in the region. The neighbouring Libya, under the rule of former leader Muammar Gaddafi, preceded Gulf countries in its ambitions to invest in Italian football and to hosting the 2002 Supercoppa Italia's final in Tripoli, Libya, as part of Gaddafi's attempt to improve business and trade ties with Europe and the United States.

More recently, Saudi Arabia became a very interesting case of sport diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa region. The Gulf country, and its Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, following the footsteps of the UAE and Qatar, recognises the power of sport for nation branding. It has shown a real interest in direct investment in business of sport with the hosting of the Dakar Rally in 2020, the bid to host the 2030 Asian Games (in competition with Qatar), and the recent deal, led by Saudi Public Investment Fund, to take over Premier League's club Newcastle FC, estimated at £300 million. The goal is to showcase the tourism potential of the kingdom and its new massive urban development project, symbolised by the ambitious \$500 billions NEOM project. More importantly, the aim is for Saudi Arabia to regain its leadership position in the Gulf region, military, economically, as well as in sport.

ON ALGERIA AND FOOTBALL POLITICS

The victory of the Algerian national team, in the 2019 AFCON, came at times of great political instability and unrest. Indeed, following President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement of his candidacy for the upcoming presidential elections in February 2019, peaceful mass protests led to Bouteflika's resignation, ending his 20-year rule. To this day, the protest movement known as Hirak continues, with demands for systemic change.

Football has been central to the Algerian nation-building process, particularly following its independence in 1962 with the construction of the national team as a representation of unity of the Algerian people (Amara and Bouandel, 2018²). After the Algerian regime survived to the Arab Spring, football was further used as a "tool to confer legitimacy on the regime" (Amara and Bouandel, 2018: p.329³).

IRIS: Do mega-sporting events' victories such as the AFCON's, especially during political and economic unstable times, translate into great nationalism? Was the Fennecs' performance politicised? If so, how?

MAHFOUD AMARA: Yes, indeed. As mentioned above, the consecutive qualification of Algeria to the 2010 and 2014 FIFA World Cups after a long absence — and particularly the historical qualification to the 2014 tournament's round of 16 for the first time — was instrumentalised politically by Bouteflika's regime. Using football for political gains was possible thanks to favourable oil prices in the market and money injected by the *nouveaux riches* and oligarchs close to Bouteflika's circles into football. In 2010 and 2014, the parades of the national team over the capital ultimately culminated into group photos with Bouteflika. In short, the Algerian football team's performance during the 2010 and 2014 World Cups was an opportunity for Bouteflika's sympathisers to claim the performance of the national team as a legacy of Bouteflika's program and leadership. Zinedine Zidane's visits in 2006 and 2010 to Algeria and the ensuing photos taken with Bouteflika, and his brothers, including influential Said Bouteflika - who was widely seen as the real power behind the presidency since the former Algerian president suffered a

² Mahfoud, A., & Bouandel, Y. (2018). Algeria. In De Wael, J.-M., Gibril, S., Gloriovova, E., Spaaij, R. (Eds.), *The Palgrave International Handbook of Football and Politics* (pp.329-345). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ *Ibid.*

stroke in 2013 - were another opportunity to politically use football by celebrating (or reclaiming) the Algerian ness of one the best player in the history of French football⁴.

The performance of the national team during AFCON in Egypt, which is also interesting considering the rivalry of Algeria and Egypt in football, came at the right time for the new leaders of Algeria following the resignation of Bouteflika on April 2, 2019, after months of peaceful mass protests. The new ruling elite represented by General Gaid Salah, the acting Head of State Abdelkader Bensalah, and their entourage, understood the importance of associating their image with football to celebrate the AFCON as a trophy against Bouteflika's era. This association was symbolised by the visit of the acting Head of State to the hotel where the national team was staying the day before the final, and photos and videos with the head coach and players who apparently were not totally ready for the protocol.

Also, during the 2019 AFCON's final, the new Algerian leadership organised the airlifting of Algerian supporters from different regions of Algeria into Egypt, with the logistic support of the army. In that regard, the Algerian daily newspaper *L'Expression* explained:

« Offrir aux jeunes supporters l'occasion d'encourager leur équipe en finale de la coupe d'Afrique, se veut comme une contribution « à apporter la joie et le bonheur dans les cœurs des Algériens (...) ». C'est aussi là, une nouvelle occasion pour l'ANP de « réitérer son engagement à accompagner ce grand et vaillant peuple, fidèle et épris de son pays, en veillant à satisfaire le vœu cher de la jeunesse, désireuse de soutenir l'Équipe nationale, par la mise à disposition de l'ensemble des moyens matériels et humains nécessaires, pour leur prise en charge totale, tout au long de cet évènement historique » (L'Expression, 23-07-2019⁵).

⁴ On the same topic see Gastaut, Y. & Apostolov, S. (2014). Zinedine Zidane's return to the land of his ancestors: politics, diplomacy or something else?. *Soccer & Society*, 15(5): pp.685-695, DOI: 10.1080/14660970.2014.912013

⁵ Translation: Giving the opportunity to young supporters to cheer for their national team during the African cup's final is a contribution to "bringing more joy and happiness in the hearts of Algerians (...)". There, it is also a new occasion for the National Armed Forces to "reiterate its commitment to support this grand and brave people, loyal and patriotic, while ensuring to satisfy the youth's valued desire to support its national team through the organisation of necessary material and human means allowing costs to be fully covered during this historical event."

The AFCON 2019 was an occasion for the Algerian Army and the youth to celebrate the victory of the Algerian national team, which is in a way a victory against Bouteflika's clan.

IRIS: With a new regime in place, has football politics in Algeria entered a new historical phase?

MAHFOUD AMARA : Football entered into a financial crisis due to the withdrawal of money coming from Bouteflika's clan and oligarchs who had benefited from massive contracts, such as agreements made with Ali Haddad who is the co-founder and CEO of *Entreprise des travaux routiers, hydrauliques et bâtiments* (ETRHB), the President of the *Forum des chefs d'entreprises* (FCE) since 2014, and the former owner of USM Alger football club.

The Algerian Football Federation, itself, went through some period of instability following AFCON 2019 as rumours about former President Kheiredine Zetchi forced resignation emerged. He was portrayed by several media as a close ally to Said Bouteflika, and questions were raised over his election as head of Algerian Football Federation, as well as a number of wrong choices his team had made over the signing of different foreign head coaches of the Algerian national team before the arrival of current manager Djamel Belmadi.

Following this unstable period, the performance of the national team in the AFCON 2019 has helped to strengthen Zetchi's position in Algerian football. Zetchi is also the former president of FC Paradou Club and its Paradou FC Academy, which is becoming well known in the training of homegrown football talents and export to Europe. Three players of the winning 2019 Algerian national team — Hicham Boudaoui, Youcef Atal and Ramy Bensebaini — in Egypt are alumni of the Paradou Academy and are playing in Europe. Among Zetchi's project is the expansion of the Paradou Academy model nationally and the establishment of centres of football excellence in different regions of Algeria, similarly to Qatar's Aspire Academy.

Algerian football stadiums have been and continue to be politicised, thanks to football supporters and ultras. Their football chants describe, using simple and direct words, the socioeconomic conditions, the corruption, and the generational gap between the aging

ruling elite and the youth, which represent the majority (Amara, 2012)⁶. During the Hirak movement, Algerian football supporters in stadiums have participated in the protests through their chants. Some of these football chants were posted on YouTube and shared on other social media platforms. They are viewed by millions in the Maghreb region and beyond, eventually becoming a new music genre adopted by rap singers such as Soolking. His song *Liberté* with the ultra group of USM Alger Ouled El Bahdja, which reached 210 million views in YouTube, became the anthem of Hirak movement in Algeria.

ON FOOTBALL, POST-COLONIAL FRANCE AND ALGERIA

In France, following Algeria's victory in its independence war in 1962 and after 130 years of colonisation, football has been a symbolic space in which post-colonial memories and identities have been expressed. In 2001, a friendly football match between France and Algeria held in Paris, a "historical game" meant to represent reconciliation between France and Algeria, and between their peoples, was abruptly interrupted after hundreds of supporters stormed the pitch. The Marseillaise had been largely whistled and "the Algeria flag had occupied the French land, at least for the time of one night" (El-Watan 7/10/1 quoted in Amara, 2006⁷). Algerian flags were waved again during the 2019 AFCON, particularly after Algeria had won the quarterfinals and the final. These events, which symbolise complex notions of belonging and identities in postcolonial France, have been instrumentalised by numerous far-right political figures to denounce an alleged failure of 'integration' from a part of the French population.

IRIS: How can we interpret widespread celebrations in France following Algeria's football success during the 2019 AFCON?

MAHFOUD AMARA: I published a paper about 2006 "friendly" match between France and Algeria (footnote). The paper considers the manner in which concepts such as 'culture', 'locality', 'nationhood' and 'citizenship', were mobilised to define or situate the identity of Algerian immigrants in France (or French people of Algerian origin) in

⁶ Mahfoud, A. (2012). Football Sub-Culture and Youth Politics in Algeria. *Mediterranean Politics*, 17(1): pp.41-58, DOI: 10.1080/13629395.2012.655045

⁷ Mahfoud, A. (2006). Soccer, post-colonial and post-conflict discourses in Algeria: Algérie-France, 6 octobre 2001, "ce n'était pas un simple match de foot". *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 32(2): pp.217-239.

comparison with that of Algerian (local national) identity. The “friendly” football game between the two national teams become a symbolic space, another occasion for remembering the French-Algerian colonial past. Moreover, it represented an opportunity to reposition Algeria in the international (sporting) arena, and more importantly, to reassert social ties between Algerians as part of the post-conflict process for national reconciliation. This was the product of more than ten years of generalised violence, which has been termed the ‘second war’ (also *la guerre sans images*⁸) of Algeria, after the first war for independence against French colonialism.

Yes indeed, Franco-Algerian football relations offer a number of venues to address the question of identity in France and in Algeria. The notion of double loyalty to country of origin and country of birth is not welcomed by some circles of intellectuals and politicians in France, which consider double loyalty as sign of deculturation or disintegration of third and fourth generation of French of Algerian (and north African descent). The presence of Algerian flags to celebrate performance of Algerian national team and that of France is controversial, particularly among far-right figures. The Algerian flag seems to raise more controversy than Portuguese, Italian or Spanish flags proudly raised and celebrated by these communities in France.

These intellectual and political circles are also concerned with French football players of Algerian descent who are selected to play with the French national team, but whose loyalty to the team is questionable (more than other players). For instance, when France is not performing well, or when the players express their pride over their sense of belonging to double cultures, the players’ loyalty to France is scrutinised and questioned.

In 2011, the investigative newspaper *Mediapart* revealed that, in a secret meeting of the National Technical Directory of French national football teams about the future football development in France, the high proportion of French players of African and North African descent in football academies was highlighted as problematic. The risk that a number of these players choose to play for their country of origin⁹, after benefiting from French competences in elite football training, funding and resources, was used to justify

⁸ Translation: The war without images

⁹ Patrick S. (2014). Le foot français, les noirs et les arabes. *Mouvements* 2014/2 (n° 78): pp.81-89: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-mouvements-2014-2-page-81.htm> See also MediaPart revelations: “Les Quotas Discriminatoires dans le Foot Français”, retrieved from <https://www.mediapart.fr/journal/france/dossier/les-quotas-discriminatoires-dans-le-foot-francais> ; Le Monde (2 June 2016) L’équipe de France dans le piège identitaire. Retrieved from <https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/latta/2016/06/02/lequipe-de-france-dans-le-piege-identitaire/>

the introduction of “discriminatory quotas” in order to reduce their number. However, the 2018 FIFA World Cup trophy proves again, after 1998, that the strength of the French national team lies in its racial and cultural diversity.

It should be noted that similar narrative can be found in Algeria, particularly when the Algerian national team is not performing well either. Hence many questions are raised about loyalty of dual nationals to Algerian national team (I highlighted this in the aforementioned 2006 paper with the notion of the “other” and uncomfortable situation of living in between). ■

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