

World Cup Football in International Relations: The 2009 Algerian-Egyptian football conflict

Sonia Benghida

Humanities Department,
Amiens University/ LESCLAP,
Amiens, France

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ABSTRACT: The intention of this paper is to introduce a number of issues relating to World Cup football and international relations within the context of the 2009 qualifying match between Algeria and Egypt. Many scholars argue that World Cup football games may increase violence and incite nationalistic aggression in no time especially in countries where football as a sport is the most prevalent. By analyzing the complex series of dynamic scenarios and tension ratios that surrounded the Algeria-Egypt 2009 game, the paper sheds the light on the direct negative impact of football can have upon the political relationships of countries. The idea of establishing international football events to encourage peace between countries goes up in smoke when not only overzealous supporters but also both media and political parties get swayed by the game. The problems that occurred in both countries led to a decrease in diplomatic flexibility of both governments by stimulating radical nationalism on both sides. The Egyptian government failed to manage these controversial issues mainly by letting its media fueling Egyptians' anger. However, both governments acknowledge their common interests and are working on a process to establish a strategic partnership of mutual benefit in order to stabilize the relations between the two countries. Despite all the problems caused by the football game, the Algerian-Egyptian convergence is a principal factor in maintaining and forging a strategic partnership of mutual benefit between Algeria and Egypt in the future.

KEYWORDS: Football diplomacy, Foreign policy, International relations, Power of Media, Football for Peace, Politicized Conflicts, Interstate violence, Nationalism.

1 INTRODUCTION

At first sight, it could seem a bit strange to write a paper on football in an international geopolitical context. However, the link between football and international research runs deeper than my personal sporting interests. The World Cup Football is not just a leisure activity, it is not a simple game played between two different teams, but is, in fact, one of the most powerful components in international relations for its impact on World politics. A world Cup football match is the biggest event in the world and the most universal phenomenon, even more universal than democracy or the market economy (Boniface, 1998). I chose to analyze the 2009 Algeria-Egypt football game when many partitions tried to attach themselves to it because they were sponsoring or hosting the football teams and there was a tremendous demand on prestige of the hosting country and a high level of tensions too. In a game which ended with the defeat of Egypt and the qualification of Algeria, the political and economic implications were tremendous.

2 THE GROWING IMPORTANCE OF FOOTBALL IN HISTORY

"Sport is probably the most effective means of communication in the modern world, bypassing both verbal and written communication and reaching directly out to billions of people world-wide. There is no doubt that sport is a viable and legitimate way of building friendship between nations." Nelson Mandela (Maguire 2005: 1).

The football game has long been a wide-spread sport in the world and an important element in human societies since centuries, but it has been neglected by historians until the early 1980s (Hamelin, 2009). By then, it was realized that sport can affect economic, political and social aspects of a society. We can find traces of the football game in different civilizations, using diverse ball forms, in different ways and for different reasons.

A bas-relief dating from the 5th century BC. shows a ballplayer accompanied by his slave, playing what could be called an ancestor of football (Hamelin, *op.cit*). Whether it is among the Egyptians, the Greeks (Episkyros) or the Romans (Harpastum), evidence of a game which involved the use of the feet and a ball exists. There are a number of references to traditional, ancient or prehistoric ball games, played by indigenous peoples in many different parts of the world. But it was the Chinese competitive game *cuju* (literally "kick ball") which is considered as the earliest form of football because it was standardized and rules were established. *Cuju* was an exercise in a military manual from the third and second centuries BC. In medieval and modern Europe, people have continued to play ball games. They played in accordance with the tradition, without any written rules. In the 16th century, the birth of a game can be observed in Italy inspired by the rules of the Roman Harpastum. However, it was not until the middle of 19th that the modern football codes have been characterized in England. The game was initially reserved for an elite, but then it spread to the entire population. Today, football is one of the most popular sports on the planet. Football is far from being a simple object of leisure and entertainment; the introduction of mass media allowed it to achieve unprecedented audience and the popularity of the sport has made it a potential policy tool "[...] used by governments domestically to promote national identity, public health, and social values, and diplomacy, to support foreign-policy goals" (Keys, 2006: 7). Harvey (2010: 189) also points out that: "*The high visibility of international sports events has fostered a favorable climate for state intervention. Nations have increasingly forged direct propaganda links between sport triumphs and the viability of their political-economic systems*". This new vision to football led to the development of new concepts such as: "sports diplomacy", "soccer diplomacy" (or football diplomacy) and "diplomats in sweat suits" (in reference to athletes).

The leaders of Soviet Russia have always regarded sports to be a matter of primary importance to the state considering both the utilitarian and socio-political aspects of sport. This can be even seen in their definition of the term 'physical culture' (1925): "*Physical culture must be considered not only from the standpoint of physical education and health and as an aspect of the cultural, economic and military training of youth [...], but also as one of the methods of educating the masses [...], and in addition, as a means of rallying the broad masses of workers and peasants around the various Party, soviet, and trade union organizations, through which the masses of workers and peasants are to be drawn into social and political activity*" (quoted in Washburn, 1956). Actually, the interrelationship between political ideology and sport is common for many countries. In today's world, sports mega-events, especially the FIFA Football World Cup, have become a major political, economic, social and cultural force.

A number of concrete examples of football diplomacy can be found in history to show how football can have a myriad of functions within international relations. Its role can be positive improving international relations of states with difficult histories, or the way around worsening the relations as is the case with the 2009 Egypt/Algerian football conflict. In the case study of this paper, there was both a negative impact in the relations between Algeria and Egypt, but a positive impact between Algeria and Sudan.

3 ALGERIA-EGYPT INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

I decided to divide International relations between Algeria and Egypt into two phases: before 1978 and after 1978. This is the date when the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat decided to collaborate with Israel and agreed on signing the Camp David Accords to conclude a Peace Treaty between the two countries. The same year the Egyptian president received a Nobel Peace Prize under the big discontent of the Arab world, especially Algeria, who all considered this as a stab in the back.

Algeria and Egypt have been generally very friendly throughout their history especially before 1978. Egypt was a strong material and political support for the Algerian war of independence. The president of Egypt Gamal Abdel Nasser maintained his support to Algerian leaders even though the British attempted to seize the Suez Canal. The relationships between the two countries were excellent at many levels. The Palestinian cause was a common denominator as to the political approach of the two countries as their views on the reform of the Security Council of the United Nations were substantially similar. Moreover, the continuing solidarity between Algeria and Egypt during the Six-Day War in Egypt 1967 and later during the October 1973 war against Israel reinforced this political rapprochement.

However, the relationships after 1978 have seen an unprecedented level of tensions following the Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's decision to negotiate with the Israelis. Gradually, Egypt started building economic relations with Israel; it

stopped the boycott laws, inaugurated airline flights between the two countries and even began to supply Israel with crude oil.

Tensions between Egypt and Algeria remained intense for decades since then until November 1988 when Algeria decided to re-establish relations with Egypt (Lea and Rowe, 2001: 155-156). Nevertheless, both countries were drawn to play in the same Group for the qualifying competition first in 1989 and again for the 2010 FIFA World Cup. The tensions noted in the football games were quickly turned into political conflicts.

4 ALGERIA-EGYPT 2009 POLITICIZED FOOTBALL CONFLICTS

This is obviously a negative example of how football can lead to more hostility at a diplomatic level. The World Cup 2009 hate match between Algeria and Egypt kept busy many parties: Fifa's disciplinary experts, the police, the governments and presidents, not only in Algeria and Egypt but also Sudan, who hosted the game between the two international teams, and France, where live a high number of French Algerians and Algerian immigrants. The diplomatic tensions between Algeria and Egypt occurred in the past as well over a football game in 1989. While in the past, the primary fault was on Algerian supporters, the 2009 incident was all caused by Egyptians, especially the hostility of the Egyptian media who massively fueled both its population and its government.

It all started by the home match which took place in Algeria in June 2009. Upon the defeat of the Egyptian team, insults spread on many internet sites, Egyptian hackers crashed some Algerian national websites and so did Algerian hackers in response to them. The tensions were kept alive for six months, to the point that upon their arrival to Cairo, the 11 Algerian players were subjected to harm. They were attacked by stone-throwing youths, who smashed their bus windows and injured three of them consequently. The incident was later covered by the Egyptian media who accused the Algerians of fabricating the claim; while the players and a representative of the FIFA witnessed the Egyptian security guards standing back and allowing the attack to happen (Montague, 2009). The Algerian players were not even able to have some rest at their hotel prior to the game as the Egyptian fans kept making loud drumming noise the whole night. Again, the absence of the police was noted during this incident. Because both the Egyptian media and the government tried to push all the blame on the Algerians, the situation was made worse and uncontrollable: violence, recriminations, diplomatic conspiracy and a trail of broken glass and burned-out cars and boats from Egypt, Algeria to France as well. Algerian, or Egyptian fans, they were all calling for cutting political and economic ties between the countries and caused millions of dollars of losses. The football agitated fans, whether Egyptians or Algerians, expressed their anger in diverse violent forms. The football match between the two teams soon transformed into a declaration of war (Jailan, 2009). The Algerians were unhappy by the pacific attitude of their media calling for peacetime or their government trying to quiet the incident, Algerians started responding to the Egyptian media attacks via youtube videos, followed by furious exchanges in newspapers and sports websites, and this led to an electronic war of words which further soured the relationship between the countries.

The verbal sparring on the Internet revived decades old political issues like the defeat of Egypt in the Six-Day War (1967) which saw the loss of Arab territories most of which are still unrecovered, and the controversial Egypt peace treaty with the Jewish State. Algerian supporters posted song videos with photos of Sunni Muslim authority Sheikh Mohammed Tantawi shaking hands with Israeli President Shimon Peres, accusing Egyptians as traitors. While Egyptian fans hit back with a song referring to Egypt's support to the Algerian independence.

The football match took place in Khartoum's Al Merreikh stadium on the 18th November 2009, with over over 35,000 Algerian and Egyptian supporters and 15,000 extra police and heavily armed security forces keeping tight control over them. Algerian supporters threatened to end Djezzy GSM, which is the main mobile network operator owned by Egypt and worth a value of \$7 billion. Both Algerian and Egyptians companies were alarmed. Several calls were made between the Algerian, Egyptian and Sudanese presidents. The Lebanese Al-Khazen, worrying about the political implications, commented that "If an Arab president calls another, the conversation should be about the issues concerning the [Arab] nation and not about a football match" (quoted by Black, 2009).

In this volatile political atmosphere, the president Abdelaziz Bouteflika gave away 15.000 free tickets and deployed the Algerian Armed Forces planes at the service of the football supporters when all the flights were fully booked. This move was the first of its kind in history and resulted in fans cheering their president in the streets. He wanted, first, to encourage the team by all means and second, to reverse the situation and control it in an attempt to calm down the angry fans. But for the Egyptian media, the Algerian president was openly declaring war by sending the fans in the army planes and is, for them, encouraging violence to happen in Sudan.

Algeria won over Egypt and was qualified for the World Cup 2010 but the relationships between Egypt and Algeria continued to heat up for a few months after the football game. Having lived all these incidents myself, I came to the

conclusion that the source of the problem was the Egyptian media who have a strong impact on both the population and the government. For example, the Egyptian TV received a hoax phone call from weeping fans pretending to be under attack from knife-wielding Algerians in Khartoum. The TV quickly staged Algerians as criminals, accused the president Bouteflika for sending thousands of 'criminals' (quoting their words) in army planes, and blamed Sudan for taking sides with Algeria. The events in Sudan evolved into a diplomatic row with Egypt after officials in Cairo accused authorities of failing to protect its citizens. The Egyptian president Mubarak in a blunt TV talk said he would send the army to Sudan if necessary because "Egypt does not tolerate those who hurt the dignity of its sons". Further, Anas el-Feqqy, Egypt's Minister of Information, influenced by the prank call, stated on Egypt's most popular television show that Algerians bought the knives and daggers from the streets of Khartoum and were planning on revenge with a massive slaughter. The Sudanese government later tried to explain that media reports in Egypt exaggerated the state of facts, but it was of no use, the media already fueled the Egyptians' anger and convinced them of the twisted events.

The inflammatory Egyptian media reports were indeed the major problem in the conflict. On 25 November 2009, 200 Egyptian intellectuals signed a statement condemning the media hype and political manipulation of the dispute.

During the football game period, many Egyptian politicians and high ranking officials saw in this tumult phase an opportunity to divert people's attention and to improve their image so they gave televised statements saying exactly what the angry audience wanted to hear. On this occasion, Hossam el-Hamalawy, a well-known Egyptian blogger said: "You cannot keep fooling people with football. People at the end of the day - even after trashing the Algerian embassy - are still going to go home on empty stomachs". Additionally, Egyptians among actors, singers, writers, journalists demonstrated great creativity swearing, cursing, insulting and describing in the worst way all Algeria, its people, and its government. For that reason, the Arab League proposed that, in the future, celebrities and political leaders should not attend such sensitive matches or expose their opinions on TV for the risk of influencing negatively public passions and the countries' international relations.

The tensions continued for a few months in both countries even after respective Presidents ordered the media to stop their negative reports on the events, especially from the side of Egypt. The events described above serve as an illustration on how football clearly plays a significant role in international relations; it has a direct impact on politics and can lead to detrimental actions to the concerned countries. In the Algeria-Egypt case, both governments understand the need to construct stable and cooperative relations.

With the election of Egyptian president Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, ties with Algeria started to get closer. The two countries will not be completely absorbed only in the management of the Algeria-Egypt relationship in the narrow sense. Instead, they plan to extend their field of vision to include the stability and development of all North Africa. In July 2014, both governments decided to be the two arms of a pincer on the Libyan desert to preserve the dominance of the security establishment in North Africa, they both share concerns about the instability of Libya, and they are both looking forward to more business opportunities and prospects for cooperation.

5 CONCLUSION

Overall this paper illustrates how football can be utilized as a strong tool in foreign policy and politics. If well applied, it can enhance the relationships between countries leading to improved international cooperation. It also contributes to the image and the popularity of a country in the same way as cultural factors do. However, the contrary also applies.

In the Algeria-Egypt case, the football matches go beyond the shared enjoyment of a game; football in both countries is really a big issue that directly touches their mutual patriotism. That is why along with tensions, nationalistic ambitions are always expressed. Consequently, the claim that football constitutes a peace movement is discredited by reporters, academics, and policymakers (United Nations, 2003; Hoberman, 2011).

The enormous energy that sprung during the football game, the enthusiasm and the synchronized national union around "one" issue, are all most vivid during football matches. Foreign observers gaped at a level of nationalist fervor and mass mobilization rarely seen before in either Algeria or Egypt. For both Algerians and Egyptians, football opens a window where they can finally express their unsatisfied oppositions and aspirations. It is indeed the result of failures in the political and economic development of both countries. Both Egypt and Algeria were going through economic disorder and political crises due to the corrupted governments.

Even though both countries are filled with people with hatred feelings, the diplomatic crisis was sorted out and did not lead to cutting off ties between the two countries. The source of the problem was identified to be the Egyptian media igniting the national tensions. I think that beyond its role as an international barometer, football between Algeria and Egypt will

continue to be a politicized football, and will always raise the zeal of each country's supporters. Thus, it is important for both countries to work on their relations and political systems in order to avoid any retaliation between the two peoples in the future football games. Currently, both sides are already working to suitably handle any issues, differences of opinion and disputes which may arise in the future. It is vital that both countries actively improve their relations to each other through different mechanisms other than football games, as these proved to be precarious to the foreign policy. I think other variety programs ranging from volleyball, basketball, martial arts, swimming, athletics, and boxing, to music, arts, theatre, and film making, will be more useful as means to foster peaceful relations. It is evident that Algeria and Egypt are now two geopolitical entities whose future football matches will be closely watched and analyzed.

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