

“We Are *mansaf*, You Are *mulūkhīya*”: Symbols and Meanings of Football in Jordan

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In 1997 in Tunisia, Wihdat FC, the team of the Wihdat Palestinian refugee camp in Jordan, participated in the Arab Champions League finals. They did not make it past the group stage. In fact, it was the third time in a row that Wihdat participated in the cup and exited at the group stage in last place. One match was especially embarrassing. Playing the Algerian club, Widad Athletic Tlemcen, Wihdat lost 7–0. Wihdat being crushed by seven goals did not go unnoticed in Jordan, especially among the supporters of Wihdat’s eternal archrivals, FC Faysali. Faysali is the oldest club in Jordan and historically the most successful. It was the club of the royal military elite forces whose members had mainly been recruited from a powerful tribe in the Amman region, Atwan. Whereas Wihdat represents the Palestinian refugees, Faysali is a symbol of the historic, tribal–royal alliance in Jordan.¹

When Faysali went up against Wihdat in the Jordanian league in 1997, after the defeat in Tunisia, Faysali supporters brought a banner saying: “Wihdat will not win the cup before McDonalds offers *mulūkhīya* on the menu.” *Mulūkhīya* is a green herb from which a thick liquid dish is made, originally through the prolonged boiling of the herb. The dish is associated with poor peasants and with traditional Egyptian village food more than Palestinian food. In Jordan, however, as peasants, and not Bedouins, traditionally ate *mulūkhīya*, the dish became known as a Palestinian one, Palestinian refugees mainly having the peasant background with which *mulūkhīya* was linked.

At Wihdat’s subsequent match, Wihdat supporters brought their own banner, a poster with a homemade McDonalds menu—including *mulūkhīya*. The *mulūkhīya* theme subsequently persisted and reached its climax when Wihdat became Jordanian champions at the end of the season. Receiving the trophy in a televised ceremony, the captain of Wihdat, Ra’fat ‘Ali, himself a Palestinian refugee, brought forward a branch of the *mulūkhīya* plant, put the *mulūkhīya* in the trophy, and pretended to drink from it. Since then Wihdat supporters have adopted the chant, “*mi’a, mi’a, Ra’fat ‘Ali, ṣubb al-mulūkhīya*” (hundred, hundred [or “go, go”], Ra’fat ‘Ali, drank the *mulūkhīya*.”²

Earlier approaches to football studies tended to analyze football as effects or dramatizations of something external to the matches.³ Football was the beautiful game but did not affect the “real” world outside.⁴ A related perspective, which we might label the “political barometer paradigm,” came to be especially dominant in analyses of Middle Eastern football. Football matches were where political and ideological trends in society at large were reflected through the chants of supporters, and where, occasionally, political taboos were broken. There are of course many good reasons why this became a dominant paradigm: the lack of alternative arenas for male youth gathering and political participation; the

stadia constituting rare arenas for public free expression and speaking truth to power; political protests infrequently emanating from the football stadia to the streets⁵; and the football pitch being about the only place in the Arab world where talent and performance, not the omnipresent *wāṣṭa* and corruption, mattered.⁶

What was not illuminated through the political barometer paradigm was the depth of genuine cultural processes among spectators during football matches, how symbols were invented and reinvented, interpreted and reinterpreted. Social communities exist through the symbolic construction of boundaries. Symbols do not express meanings; they give people the capacity to make meaning. As Anthony Cohen has outlined, such cultural processes are crucial for making and remaking social communities. The struggle over and manipulation of symbols is relational—the consciousness of community belonging is made through contrast with others.⁷ It is in this context that the symbolic struggle over *mulūkhīya* and the symbolic binary oppositions of football in Jordan should be understood: as part of an ongoing process through which the social communities of Jordan were symbolically constructed.

Thus *mulūkhīya* has been constituted as part of a binary opposition in Jordan in which its counterpart is *mansaf*. *Mansaf* is a dish made from hardened, dry yogurt and meat from lamb or camel, served on large platters of flatbread. *Mansaf* was, and still is, the feast meal of Bedouins. Hence *mansaf* versus *mulūkhīya* symbolizes the old cleavage between the fallahin (peasants) and the nomadic tribal Bedouins, and consequently, most Palestinian refugees in Jordan being of peasant origin, the difference between East Bank Jordanians who originated in the country before 1948 and Palestinian Jordanians of refugee descent.

Mansaf–mulūkhīya has been constructed as a symbolic boundary even though Palestinians in Jordan eat *mansaf* from time to time, as do most Middle Easterners. From an East Bank Jordanian football supporter's perspective the symbolic construction is a statement of relative group worth—and Palestinians would acknowledge *mansaf* as above *mulūkhīya* in the regional food status hierarchy. "Because we eat *mulūkhīya* they say we eat like sheep," said Yanan, a Palestinian refugee and Wihdat supporter who accompanied me to several matches during fieldwork in 2014.

"We are *mansaf*, you are *mulūkhīya*," Faysali supporters now chant during matches, the chant serving as part of their symbolic weaponry against Wihdat.⁸ Through football *mansaf* and *mulūkhīya* have become symbols of the two ethnic communities constituting the Jordanian nation. And through football *mulūkhīya*, symbolically constructed as a symbol of stigma for East Bank supporters, has been transformed into a symbol of pride for the Palestinians.

The *mulūkhīya–mansaf* dichotomy is but one of the binary oppositions heard during Wihdat matches. As I observed in Irbid in May 2014 watching Wihdat play the home team, al-Husayn, other symbols and meanings are likewise continuously referred to. "They say we used to eat grass," says the Wihdat supporter Yanan, as al-Husayn supporters chant: "grass eaters, grass eaters." al-Husayn has a tribal East Bank support base, a sort of lighter version of al-Faysali. The grass eaters chant alludes to the peasant background of the Palestinians but also to the historical poverty of the refugees as they arrived in Jordan devastated in 1948. During the match every chant, every symbolic meaning, contrasts with the chants of the supporters of the opposing team. And so Wihdat supporters yell back: "shepherds, shepherds," shepherding being associated with Bedouin, East

Bank Jordanians, less urban, modern, and educated than the Palestinian Jordanians regard themselves. “We gave you homes, we gave you money, you live because of us,” al-Husayn fans chant. “Allah gave us the right,” Wihdat supporters yell back, before they continue with one of their trademark chants, *allāh, wiḥdat, al-quds al-‘arabiyya* (God, Wihdat, Arab Jerusalem), which connects the team to God and Palestine. Al-Husayn supporters reply in kind: *allāh, ḥusayn, al-quds al-ḥashimiyya*; the royal family of Jordan (and Transjordan) has since 1924 been the custodian of Christian and Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem—al-Quds is Jordanian, not Palestinian.

Four days later, on 23 May 2014, Wihdat plays at home against Dhat Ras. If they win they will win the Jordanian league. The stadium is packed with Wihdat supporters, there is a heavy police presence, and TV crews are broadcasting the match live. With Wihdat up 2–0 as the referee blows his whistle after ninety minutes of play, a Wihdat supporter storms the pitch. Chased by police, unable to catch him, he runs in front of ecstatic Wihdat fans. He raises his hand and waves to the roaring crowd holding a branch of green *mulākhīya* leaves.

NOTES

¹Dag Tuastad, “‘A Threat to National Unity’. Football in Jordan: Ethnic Divisive or a Political Tool for the Regime?” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 10 (2014): 1–15.

²Mustafa Bala, editor of the Wihdat fanzine *al-Riyadi al-Wihdat*, interview with the author, Amman, May 2014.

³Richard Giulianotti, *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999), 10.

⁴Carl Rommel, “Playing with Difference: Football as a Performative Space for Division among Suryoye Migrants in Sweden,” *Soccer & Society* 12 (2011): 850–64; John Hargreaves, *Sport, Power and Culture: A Social and Historical Analysis of Popular Sports in Britain* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986).

⁵Dag Tuastad, “From Football Riot to Revolution: The political Role of Football in the Arab World,” *Soccer & Society* 15 (2014): 376–88.

⁶James Dorsey, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* (London: Hurst, 2016), 5; Adel Iskandar, *Egypt in Flux: Essays on an Unfinished Revolution* (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2013), 18–19.

⁷Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London: Routledge, 1985), 1–15.

⁸Wihdat supporters, interview with author’s field assistant Moushira Abu Shemesh, Amman, December 2018.