

How Israel slept through the Palestinian bid to oust it from FIFA

The very fact that the subject of ousting Israel is even on the agenda is an unprecedented Palestinian victory - and point to an Israeli cluelessness.

By [Uzi Dann](#) | May 13, 2015 | 8:40 AM |



Palestinian soccer chief Jibril Rajoub, left, and FIFA President Sepp Blatter in Ramallah in April.
Photo by Reuters

The fact that the Foreign Ministry – in the 89th minute, to use a soccer cliché – has intervened with regard to the Palestinian demand to oust Israel from FIFA, the international soccer federation, shows how clueless people are in Israel about the importance of sports in international politics.

Palestine Football Association head Jibril Rajoub has been going at this for the past two years already, citing a breach of FIFA regulations requiring freedom of passage for players. For the past two years, FIFA president Sepp Blatter and the president of the Union of European Football Associations (and friend of Israel) Michel Platini, have been trying to dissuade Rajoub.

Blatter and his people have met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a number of times, even just last year, after Blatter succeeded in having discussion of the Palestinian proposal removed from the agenda at the previous FIFA congress, before the 2014 World Cup. One of the people present at the meeting between Blatter and Netanyahu said he was shocked at the disrespect the prime minister showed one of the most influential figures in world sports, and no less shocked by how scornful Netanyahu was at the idea that Israel could be blacklisted.

Rajoub understands very well the implications of such a move, even if his proposal is not passed. The fact that the subject was even on the agenda is an unprecedented Palestinian victory.

As opposed to suspending a member due to financial irregularities or prohibited government involvement – decisions that are made by FIFA's executive committee – the FIFA congress has over the years ousted only one country: South Africa during apartheid. True, it's not the same thing, but it shows how difficult Israel's situation is.

Even the suspension of Yugoslavia and its ousting from the 1992 European Championship 10 days before the games started was not initiated by FIFA or UEFA, but rather forced on the organizers following a UN Security Council resolution on Yugoslavia, which was at the height of a civil war.

On the face of it, granting freedom of movement to athletes is not a matter that the Israel Defense Forces and other security agencies cannot come to terms with. But this has not been the crux of the matter for a long time. This is a political struggle. The Israel Football Association has made great efforts, and the connections of its

former chairman Avi Luzon might help, but the Israeli government should have involved itself at a much earlier stage.

It is unlikely that a Palestinian proposal to suspend Israel from FIFA will pass, but if it does, it will break open the floodgates. First of all, Israel's national team and Israeli club teams will not be able to compete in any international games. But it could very well not end there: As happened with South Africa, other athletic associations could adopt the FIFA proposal.

According to FIFA regulations, a relative majority of the organization's 209 members must approve a proposal for it to pass. Blatter has promised the heads of Israel's soccer association that if the Palestinian proposal does come to a vote, he will demand a special majority of 75 percent, invoked in certain circumstances, to pass it. It's hard to picture the proposal passing under those circumstances, but some in the IFA have expressed concern that a majority of between two thirds and three quarters would give rise to complications and a legal fight.

None of this would have happened if the problem had been dealt with when still in the bud. But the Prime Minister's Office and the Foreign Ministry ignored it. Apparently, they do not understand the global significance of soccer and sports. Now they are learning, as usual, the hard way.