

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

THE SYRIAN MENS'S NATIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM AS A
PROPAGANDA TOOL OF THE ASSAD GOVERNMENT

by
NAZIH MARWAN OSSEIRAN

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by
NAZIH MARWAN OSSEIRAN

Approved by:



Dr. Danyel Reiche, Associate Professor for Comparative Politics Department of
Political Studies and Public Administration,

Dr. Full Name, rank Department (as listed in AUB Catalogue of current year)	Advisor
Dr. Ohannes Geukjian, Assistant Professor of Political Studies & Conflict Resolution Political Studies & Public Administration Department	Signature
Idem	Co-Advisor
Dr. Carmen Geha, Associate Professor of Public Administration, Department of Political Studies and Public Administration	Signature
Idem	Member of Committee
	Signature
Idem	Member of Committee

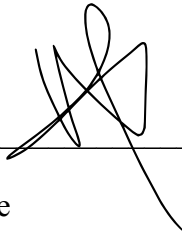
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Nazih Marwan Osseiran

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This paper seeks to explore, study and analyze the impact of the civil war on the Syrian men's national football team. To do so, the author interviewed a dozen current and former players, coaches and administrators who at some point were part of the national football team and participated in some of its most important matches. This research untangles how the Assad regime used the men's team to polish his image at home and abroad as part of his "Authoritarian Upgrading," machinations to polish his image at home and abroad. Assad made the team's success his own. This paper will attempt to explain how.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	1
ABSTRACT	2
INTRODUCTION	6
A. Background	7
B. Topic Significance and Objectives	9
C. Thesis Map	13
LITERATURE REVIEW	16
A. Undetstudied Nexus between Sports and Politics	16
B. Sports and Nationalism	18
C. Sports and Social Cohesion	20
D. Sports as "Soft Power in International Relations	21
E. Sports and Elections	23
F. Sports and Politics in the Arab World	25
1. Qatar and the 2022 World Cup	27
2. Football in Jordan: Controversial Preservation of National Unity	28
3. Sports in Lebanon: Fueling Sectarian Division	29
G. The Syrian National Football Team during the Civil War	30
1. Conflict and Sports in Syria	30
2. The Influence of External Actors	32

H. Research Gap.....	35
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	36
A. Authoritarian Resilience and the Failure of Democratization in the Arab World..	36
B. Authoritarian Upgrading: A Theoretical Framework.....	38
1. Adapt or Perish: The Construction of “Hybrid” Authoritarian Governance Models.....	41
2. The Core Tenets of Authoritarian Upgrading.....	50
C. The Reconstruction of Authoritarianism in Post-Conflict Syria.....	50
METHADODOLOGY	54
A. Research Philosophy.....	54
B. Research Design.....	55
1. Approach.....	55
2. Instrument.....	55
3. Sample.....	56
4. Data Collection.....	57
5. Data Analysis.....	57
6. Ethical Considerations.....	58
DISCUSSION	59
A. Controlling the Political Narrative: Unity in the Fight for the Nation.....	59
B. False Sense of Neutrality with a Nationalistic twist: Obfuscating Political Diversity.....	62
C. The Price of Loyalty: Subtle Coercion through Indirect Regime Endorsement....	64

D. FIFA’s Unclear Human Rights Pledges.....	71
CONCLUSION	71
A. Literature Review.....	74
B. Instrumentalization of the Syrian National Football Team for Authoritarian Upgrading.....	74
C. Research Limitations.....	75
D. Recommendations for Future Research.....	76
APPENDIX I.....	74
APPENDIX II	75
REFERENCES	80

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

For most of my life, the love of football seemed like one of the few things that united people across the world. The fact that so many tuned in to watch groups of 21 men kick a ball across a field every four years was baffling to me. The fact that it aroused such deep passion awed me. Before my eyes grown men openly wept after a loss and arguments and altercations during matches between friends sent chairs flying. It retained a sense of magic like little else I had experienced. I never thought to consider its political dimensions.

I have covered the conflict raging in Syrian since 2016. My reporting has taken me to Damascus and Homs, and introduced me to Syrians of all walks of life. Heartbreak is part of the job when it comes to covering Syria and the seemingly endless trials its people continue to endure. But it is a special form of heartbreak to see an event such as a football loose its enchantment, those fairy-tale like features dispelled by the very real considerations of politics and war. I saw before my eyes something pure get tarnished by power, and the insistence on retaining power at all costs.

When the Syrian men's national football team played in Malaysia in 2018, the intersection between politics, war and the sport of football became to me, too painfully obvious to ignore. When the team played their home game that foreign soil, only 350 Syrian fans attended. When the winning goal was scored, it was by a player who had once supported the opposition and had vowed never to play for the Syrian regime but had returned to do so anyway. (Sarmah, 2017)

When the team won, Syrians celebrated. But once the team lost, Syrians celebrated as well, showcasing the depth of the schism in the country. These details intrigued me and drove me to choose this subject for my dissertation. This study is an endeavor aimed at exploring how the civil war in Syria has impacted the popular sport of football. And, in turn, how the sport has been utilized in the context of the civil war as a tool employed by the ruling government.

A. Background

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the Syrian civil war, the events that took place over the last decade and what effect these developments had on the Syrian national football team. It then highlights the importance of studying the relationship between sports and politics in Syria in times of war, given the dearth in academic literature on this subject in this specific context. Lastly, the chapter lays out map of the thesis and describes the contents of subsequent chapters.

Syria has been the hotbed of a protracted civil war that since 2011 has destroyed multiple cities, erased entire towns and villages, displaced over six million people, and claimed the lives of anywhere between half a million and one million victims (Laub 2020). The scope of devastation has enveloped almost every aspect of civil life. Amidst the ongoing violence, organized sports have suffered because of the disintegration of the relevant authorities and institutions, as well as the communities that participate and support them. The collapse of organized sports is not surprising within the context of a civil war where sports tend to take a backseat to violence, survival, and the emergence of desperate coping mechanisms.

The men's national football team has been at the heart of controversy since the beginning of the crises. On the one hand, several key national team players were openly involved in the uprisings against the regime as early as 2011, occasionally taking the helm in leading demonstrations, mobilizing masses, voicing popular anti-regime sentiments, and demanding the departure of Bashar al-Assad, the president. On the other hand, the men's national team has received substantial attention and support from the state. This also reflected on the team's performance. It was on the verge of reaching the FIFA World Cup in Russia in 2018 and qualified to the AFC Asian Cup 2019 in the UAE (AFC 2020). In both competitions, the World Cup qualification matches and at the AFC Asian Cup, the men's team stirred significant publicity at the local, regional and international levels. Both participations were engulfed by propaganda, high expectations and political fighting between the opposing camps in addition to controversy.

The political bickering and controversy were particularly fueled by disputes and divisions over national identity, political symbolism, displays of power, the manipulation of sports to whitewash the regime's war crimes and the exploitation of football to reconstruct the reputation of Assad as a benevolent sponsor of the youth and sports. At the same time, the regime's investment in the men's national football team was perceived as an attempt to gain acceptance and initiate a process of normalization between the international community and a system of rule that had since the beginning of the war been treated as an international pariah (Corcoran, 2017).

Syria's men's national team has become so embroiled in the country's politics of civil war that it has been labeled the "Eagles of Qasioun" by the regime and its supporters, in reference to Mount Qasioun that overlooks the capital Damascus. In

contrast, the opposition camp has applied the derogatory nickname Barrels Team, alluding to the explosive barrels they accuse the regime of using to bomb and murder civilians. Even individual players who joined or refused to wear the team jersey have been targeted by a variety of conflicting political pressures. Players have been depicted as national heroes, have been the targets of harassment, they were accused of treason, and even received death threats (Montague, 2017).

A 'Free Syrian National Team,' was formed in 2012 and it includes players from across Syria but it does not have much international recognition. In 2017, it played a match against a local German football team as protestors were demonstrating in front of the Russian embassy. The game was held in the spirit of a Syrian day of rage against Russia's involvement in the war in Syria. (Slem, 2017)

The Syrian Premier League has 14 participating clubs. Attendance died down during the fighting but has since returned with attendance sometimes reaching 30,000 ("Syria Welcomes First FIFA" 2020).

B. Topic Significance and Objectives

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore, study and analyze the impact of the civil war on Syria's men's national football team. In addition to addressing the devastating impact of the civil war on the development of sports in general and football in particular, the paper will explore how and why the men's national football team became so entangled in civil war politics. It will also analyze the potential implications of exploiting the national team in civil war politics. Different to the national men's team, the national women's team is no longer active ("FIFA/Coca-Cola Women's

World Ranking” 2020). It has lacked the infrastructure to advance opportunities for female players (“Pioneering Janoud breaking down barriers” 2020).

The study of the relationship between sports and politics, sports and nationalism, and sports and civil wars is not new. Anderson (2015, p.33) traces such ties to the 19th century with the rise of nationalism in West Europe and its integration in universal education, all of which resulted in forging a close relationship between popular sports and ethnic and racial identities. In the era of globalization, nationalism associated with and loyalty to national teams seemed to be weakening with the rise of international clubs loaded with multi-national and multi-ethnic clubs. On the other hand, as sport historian Mark Dyreson (1998) points out, globalization did not really undermine the vigor of nationalism behind national teams, and to the contrary, he considered that sports had spread around the world and were functioning as part of the national discourse.

A possible explanation for this fluctuation in the relationship between popular sports and nationalism could be the level of distress or perceived threat that a certain ethnic, religious, or national group may be subjected to. For example, Anderson (2015 p. 277,) explains that “choosing to support a certain sports team is a public statement of identity, with a certain imagined group.” The concept of imagined group goes to the heart of identity politics and how such politics is expressed by groups whose members share certain histories and geographies as well as shared values and aspirations.

Civil wars in general may be among the most distressful events in the histories of nations or groups, especially if the war is fueled and fought along ethnic, religious, or ideological lines. In a civil war context, warring groups may be engaged in intense violence against each other over very serious differences while at the same time sharing

much more in common than they do with other external groups. This in itself could fuel the intensity of the tribal-like sentiments and behaviors of communities around competitive sports. This could be seen, for example if and when the teams representing the warring groups are confronting each other, or if dispute arises over representation of the nation's official team in international events (Rensmann, 2015).

Previous works (Ikuo, Yasuharu,; Murray & Hassan, 2018; Nakajima, 1992 Riess, 1990; Zakravsky, 2016;) by historians, sociologists and political scientists have studied the impact of popular sports on civil wars as well as the impact of civil wars on sports, particularly in protracted conflicts such as football and rugby in the Irish conflict and football during the Spanish civil war. Still, this field of study remains scarcely dissected. In the case of the Syrian civil war, and apart from a few reports in newspapers and other media publications, there seem to be no documented studies on the subject.

Hence, the topic is worth studying, especially when taking a number of reasons into consideration: First, the few thorough studies that have focused on sports such as football in civil wars in the United States, Ireland, Spain, and to a lesser extent in the former Republic of Yugoslavia, have all been conducted in the contexts of western or European countries. The majority of studies or publications on the subject of sports such as football and civil war in regions such as Africa or Asia, on the other hand, have primarily focused on issues such as peacebuilding, healing wounds, and bringing communities with a sense of reconciliation and togetherness after the conclusion of conflict , or in an effort to reinforce post-war peace-building mechanisms (Cardenas, 2012). In addition to this, there seem to be a lack of studies on the impact of popular sports on an ongoing civil war, or the impact of an ongoing civil war on a popular sport

such as football. Therefore, this study represents an opportunity to explore how civil war has impacted the popular sport of football in Syria, and how football in turn has impacted or has been used in the context of the civil war, or perhaps even as a tool in the civil war.

Secondly, the study is focusing solely on the men's national football team primarily because women's football has generally been abandoned during the civil war, despite the fact that the Syrian national women's team had actually been prominent, to the point of achieving third position in the 2005 West Asian Football Federation Championship. In addition to this, the men's national football seems to be the sport that has survived best the onslaught of years of civil war. Moreover, football remains the single most popular sport in Syria, and it remains widely practiced even if only as hobby, on a wide scale. In fact, it has remained intensely popular to the point that several fatwas were issued in the ISIS-controlled areas and later in the Al- Qaeda- affiliated Nusra Front - controlled areas banning football as an evil distraction. Throughout the war years, therefore, men's football has evidently remained a popular activity, and this in turn contributed to the relevance of the endeavors of the men's national football team to the warring factions and communities.

Thirdly, there is the fact that the men's national football team has been in the spotlight of the civil war since its onset. Despite its lack of a significant record internationally prior to the war, the defection of team players in the early years of the war were a media sensation, equal in importance to the defection of senior army officers at the time. Similarly, the decision of several key players who had previously defected to return and wear the jersey for the national team in regional and international

competitions was equally sensational and the cause of a major media war between the pro- and anti-regime camps.

Fourthly, almost every aspect of the men's national team has become an extension of the ongoing civil war, whether it is the symbolic labels given by the warring factions (Qasioun Eagles vs The Barrels Team), the identities of team players, the jersey designs, and of course the regional and international performance of the team. During a number of international competitive matches, pro-regime fans cheered for the team zealously while anti-regime fans cheered for the opposing teams while wearing their national team jersey. On other occasions, anti-regime groups have lobbied foreign clubs to prevent the signing of players from the national team, succeeding at times and failing at others (Corcoran, 2017).

Lastly, it is worth noting that for decades prior to the war, men's football in Syria was almost always a matter of politics and a medium of political expression for the country's diverse communities, especially during the most repressive periods. Upon the onset of the war, even at a time when the men's national team witnessed one of its worst FIFA rankings, it suddenly received substantial attention and sponsorship from Assad. This only reinforces the argument that the men's national team was of significant importance in the civil war context and politics.

Given all of these issues, one of the aims of this thesis is to contribute academically to the study of the relationship between football and civil war in Syria, and possibly draw lessons on how popular sports such as football are affected by civil wars in general.

B. Thesis Map

In summary, the bloody Syrian civil war has devastated the country on many levels, including fields such as sports. The antagonism that emerged following the state's crackdown on protesters created a schism in society that spilled over onto the Syrian national football team, leading not just to divisions within the team itself but also among its fan base. This dissertation seeks to address how the Syrian civil war affected the national football team in more depth through a political lens. In particular, it focuses on the team's exploitation as a political tool by various actors, as well as the impact of such exploitation on the team's players and staff.

Chapter 2 reviews a broad range of literature on the relationship between sports and politics, including how sports are at times instrumentalized both locally and internationally as a political vehicle that serves ruling regimes. The discussion is then narrowed down to sports and politics in the Arab world, before focusing on the performance of Syria's national football team in times of civil war. Chapter 3 examines how authoritarianism in the Middle East has survived across the past few decades, presenting the theoretical framework of authoritarian upgrading as a basis for the paper's exploration of the relationship between the Syrian regime and the Syrian national football team. Chapter 4 then elaborates on the methodology employed to fill the research gap pertaining to the relationship between sports and authoritarianism in the Arab world, zeroing in on the football industry in Syria as a case study. Chapter 5 offers a thorough discussion of the primary data contextualized within the findings of secondary research to draw inferences about the role of the Syrian national football team in the Syrian regime's efforts to reconstruct its damaged authoritarian system. Finally, Chapter 6 summarizes the key findings of the research, discusses its limitations

and theoretical implications, and suggests some avenues for relevant future research on the subject.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews a broad range of literature on the link between politics and sports, including how it relates to nationalistic sentiment and its propensity to be utilized for purposes such as fomenting social cohesion. Subsequently, the international political dimension of sports is discussed, primarily through the lens of “soft” power and its implications. The discussion is then narrowed down to the relationship between sports and politics in the Arab world, offering a few examples that show the diversity of roles that sports have played in the context of Middle East politics. Finally, literature is covered on the performance of the Syrian national football team in the midst of Syria’s violent civil war. The chapter culminates in the formulation of a research gap that this thesis aims to fill.

A.The Understudied Nexus between Politics and Sports

The nexus between politics and sports has been a key focus of contemporary sports history. While historical accounts of sports’ political implications prior to the twentieth century are close to nonexistent, in the past century some historians have developed an affinity for the intersection between the sporting realm on one hand, and the political controversies that it engenders on the other: “The sheer of the work – from studies of Roman Catholic sports policy in Belgium to an analysis of squabbles over the alleged lesbianism of the Australian national women’s cricket team – makes it difficult even to imagine a comprehensive survey” (Guttmann, 2003, p. 364). Guttmann states that there are a few broad areas that have garnered much attention in this domain: The role of

sports under fascist regimes and communist societies, the relationship between sports and the politics of ethnicity and race in countries such as the U.S. and South Africa, gender discrimination in sports, the political force of the Olympic Games, and sports as the product of the imagination of capitalist institutions.

Yet, despite this newfound attention to the role that sports play in the political domain, Thomas Gift and Andrew Miner (2017) assert that this relationship is still understudied, which they perceive as an oddity given the thorough intertwinement of society and sports: “For many societies, sports are the closest thing that exists to a civic religion. Today, sports venues reflect our political values, priorities, sensibilities, and even neuroses. In the shadows of their walls, we worship athletes like heroes from a Virgil epic, sing anthems that affirm our national supremacies, memorize player facts and statistics like our lives depend on it, and demand federal investigations when our sports idols disappoint us” (p. 129). The dearth in literature covering sports and politics is all the more peculiar given the otherwise noteworthy research infrastructure dedicated to the sporting realm. In fact, multiple top-rated universities have established sports-themed institutes. Furthermore, some economics and statisticians have made headlines for their application of analytics to the prediction of sports games; even in the legal field, many clinics have emerged that are entirely dedicated to sports (Gift & Miner, 2017). The scholars go on to emphasize the importance of studying the relationship between politics and sports, not only because the two so visibly intersect in society, but also because sports constitute an ideal lens through which conventional subject matters may be analyzed, including corruption, political empowerment, and social capital, all central aspects of the sporting field. Not to mention that the study of the politics of sports also offers methodological benefits: “Sports possess an inherently unpredictable

quality, both on and off the field. Who wins and who loses, and how political interests benefit from sports by chance, present unique opportunities for applying causal identification strategies” (p. 131). Barry Houlihan (2000) divides the literature on sports and politics into two categories: ‘politics in sport’ and ‘politics and sport.’ “The study of politics and sport directs our attention to the use made by governments of sport and the process by which public policy is made and implemented” (Houlihan, 2000, p.214). This body of work is concerned with the role of the state vis-à-vis the sports sector and deals with the subjects of sports and national identity, economic development, and foreign policy.

“Within this conceptualization, the power to act politically is derived from a variety of resources, including expertise, money and legitimacy, which are distributed across a wide range of social institutions.” (Houlihan, 2000, p.214)

B. Sports and Nationalism

Like popular sports, politics often involves battles of ideas and wills or even groups of different identities. It is not surprising, therefore, that the two are mixed, even if unintentionally. In nineteenth and early twentieth century Ireland, Hassan and O’Kane (2010) note that the choice of a game was in itself a political statement. Since rugby was perceived as an English sport, Irish nationalists preferred football and considered those who played rugby as Anglophiles or loyalists to the British crown. In an intensely divided Ireland, playing football was not merely a sports activity, but also a political choice and a statement to the British. Eventually, however, these dividing lines disappeared as both sports gained popularity in both camps, but the political divisions engulfing the clubs and fans on both sides were always heated and intense.

Interestingly, an opposite view was proposed by 19th century Norwegian chemist Peter Waage, who coined the term “refrigerator in reverse” in reference to the management of national and political sentiments in sports, arguing that national politics tend to make sports warm on the inside and cold and hostile on the outside (Goksoyr, 2010, p. 276). Based on Waage’s proposed hypothesis, when nations or national groups are faced by hostility from others, they tend to shift to extreme measures to protect their togetherness against others, namely by “shutting the door on the rest of the world and living a sporting life in splendid isolation” (Goksoyr, 2010, p. 276). Hence, instead of interacting with others through sports, the nation or group isolates itself, avoiding the intensity of competition with the other perceived with hostility.

Waage’s hypothesis may have been true, for example, when applied at certain phases of a conflict, but not necessarily at all times. For example, it was true when the two sides in a divided Ireland chose to play two separate sports, namely rugby and football. In such a context, the Irish nationalists and the Anglophiles did not have to interact, compete, show respect to each other, or even symbolically attempt to overcome each other. Eventually, however, the growing popularity of the two sports made such a refrigerator-in-reverse effect impossible as both communities became heavily involved in both sports. A similar observation could also be applied in the United States, where African Americans and white Americans had their own football and baseball leagues, before the popularity of these sports made such isolative arrangements unattractive and eventually obsolete (Bairner & Sugden, 1999).

Moreover, some go to the extent of theorizing that sports nurture feelings of jingoism and chauvinism, compelling a shared belief among individuals that their society is superior: “When ardent nationalists convince themselves that a highly

arbitrary conglomeration of tens of millions of human beings is somehow biologically or socially “real” and deeply consequential enough to give up their lives and shed the blood of those associated with other nations – you can bet that something deep in the human psyche is being touched. Sports fans may simply be the comic sidekicks of nationalists” (Barash, 2009, para. 33).

Otherwise, sports and politics are linked in ways that are hardly ever considered, particularly in current times when, despite ongoing conflict in some parts of the world, military initiatives are rare relative to previous eras. In fact, there was a time when sports constituted a core part of governments’ intent to foster a militarily operative population, ready for confrontation if called upon (McIntosh, 1971). This was especially evident during the nineteenth century, as imperialist and nationalist sentiment grew among Western countries. In particular, gymnastics were introduced as the pillar of educational establishments’ physical education curricula. In various Western nations, including England, Sweden, Denmark, Germany and Russia, gymnastics were introduced at the elementary school level. Moreover, in the twentieth century, the establishment of Boy Scout units marked the introduction of a paramilitary vehicle with distinct military-patriotic-religious characteristics (Lin, Lee & Nai, 2008).

C. Sports and Social Cohesion

Lipsky (1979) sheds light on the symbolism of sports in the U.S. and how it contributed to social cohesion, particularly in the industrial age. He argues that at a time where young people felt unsettled concerning their social and occupational identities, sports heroes provided for a model that endowed them with a sense of security and stability. In particular, identification with sports heroes compelled individuals from low-

status groups to perceive the social system as being open to individual mobility. Moreover, American sports symbolism is heavily focused on the principle of working as a team. Lipsky states that the team symbol fulfills two crucial functions. From both the spectator and participant viewpoints, the team – particularly at the amateur level – may represent a surrogate community: “In many ways, the national infrastructure of teams in American can be seen functioning in a fashion analogous to Durkheim’s hypothesized ‘corps intermédiaire,’ an infrastructure of groups aiding in the cohesion of industrial society” (Lipsky, 1979, p. 32). As such, when perceived as a cohesive unit, the team offers a sense of purpose and camaraderie. In that regard, the fraternal images of teammates may be seen as contrasted with the cultural proscriptions against men’s affective interactions. Not to mention that the moral imperatives of fraternity and cooperation may be perceived as highly appealing. Lipsky goes on to suggest that sports have long contributed positively to social cohesion, precisely because they offer individuals a way to participate in what he terms a “ritual drama,” whereby they can express their emotions and beliefs within a type of social ceremony, hence reinforcing these beliefs, especially when it comes to solidarity and unity. What is most important is that sports symbolism serves the function of social cohesion even amid otherwise seemingly non-favorable environmental elements: “Sport, when viewed as a ritual drama, enables its adherents to escape from the dullness of everyday life. The intense excitement that sports generates can also be seen to sensitize fans to a level of awareness that contrasts sharply to the high levels of political apathy and social indifferences” (p. 33).

D. Sports as “Soft Power” in International Politics

The dynamic relationship between sports and politics in the past few decades may best be understood within the context of “soft power,” as discussed by Joseph Nye (2004). Nye stipulated that there are two forms of power which countries may employ to compel other countries to behave in a manner favorable to them: “Soft” and “Hard” power. The latter – more traditional – approach that has been used for centuries, implies the use of military and economic means, usually involving a carrots and sticks strategy, to coerce other countries. As for the former, Nye describes it as a non-coercive method of cultural diplomacy, an intangible form of “cooptive power”.

The use of sports in the realm of politics has been attributed by various scholars to its perceived effectiveness as a form of “soft power”. States have long acknowledged the substantial role that sports play not only in the consolidation of domestic power, but also a resource to increase prestige and employ the leverage of “soft power” in the global political arena. Traditionally, sports investment in the service of building and acquiring international status, as well as augmenting foreign policy, was undertaken by various political regimes, most notably autocratic ones. Arguably, this began with Nazi Germany and the Berlin Olympics of 1936, then continuing in the Cold War era, particularly among the Warsaw Pact countries which invested a substantial proportion of their GDP on the achievement of national prestige, improved by means of sporting success and medal counts. In turn, such success would bolster the global image and identity of these countries, as a show of power (Rensmann, 2015).

Jonathan Grix & Donna Lee (2013) examined three countries that are active in hosting sports mega events: Brazil, South Africa and China. Although witnessing different rates of economic growth, these countries are united by their affinity for hosting such events.

“In this global context they provide unprecedented diplomatic opportunities for host states in particular to practice the politics of attraction by championing universally shared and admired sporting norms in ways that project a positive image of themselves in order to increase credibility and status on the world’s stage” (Grix & Lee, 2013, p. 536).

These events both showcase the states’ soft power in addition to playing a part in generating this soft power. After China hosted the Olympics in 2008 and South Africa hosted the World Cup in 2010, both countries shed their pariah status and were seen as states that were included in the global community (Grix & Lee, 2013).

Developed countries also engage in soft power generation through sports mega events. Both Germany’s hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2006 and the U.K.’s hosting of the Summer Olympics in 2012 demonstrate the benefits the international image of a nation accrues after a successful hosting of such events. (Grix & Houlihan, 2014).

E. Sports and Elections

The inextricable link between politics and sports is evidenced by politicians’ attempts to capitalize on the identification or affiliation of voters with some sports teams to improve their election – or reelection – odds. The U.S., in particular, has traditionally been a hotbed of political influence through the employment of sports and their underlying cultural elements. As early as 1948, then-Senator Strom Thurmond, a Republican, endeavored to give a speech at a prominent NASCAR racing event, speaking to a crowd of predominantly white, religious, conservative men with a tendency to vote Republican. This demographic was typically enthralled with NASCAR, and politicians like Thurmond capitalized on this fact to – successfully –

increase their popularity and, by association, their chances of remaining in office. At the time, knowing his audience well, the incumbent used racist terms to appeal to this audience, making a promise that “niggers” would not be “invited into our theaters, our swimming pools, our homes and churches”. Decades later, in an effort to appeal to his southern base, Republican President Richard Nixon invited NASCAR driver Richard Petty to the White House (Matamala, 2012, p. 6). Moreover, recently Barack Obama’s presidential election campaigns included a sports element; in his first campaign, then-Senator Obama was often featured as driving to the hoop, a basketball in hand, an image picked up by the mainstream media and broadcasted to American audiences (Curry, 2012). However, not all political attempts to use sports in the context of elections have served this purpose. In 2016, Carly Fiorina, then-Republican presidential hopeful in the U.S., declared her backing for the Iowa Hawkeyes, going against her own alma mater, Stanford. Trying to pander Iowa Caucuses, her attempt nevertheless backfired and she was rebuked and accused of being an opportunist (Gift & Miner, 2017).

Understandably, political candidates taking advantage of voters’ affinity for sports is not a strange phenomenon, and it is not exclusive to the sporting realm per se. In fact, politicians competing in elections have long endeavored to study voters thoroughly to determine how they can best reach them and sway their vote. However, some findings about the indirect influence of sports on election results are remarkable. Healy, Malhotra and Mo (2010) found that, prior to governmental elections in the U.S., voters who experienced their sports teams winning over rivals had a higher tendency to reelect incumbents, regardless of their achievements. The researchers determined that the effect was primarily subconscious, most likely linked to voters’ feelings of

wellbeing after the teams that they supported were victorious. They also found that by making voters more aware of this state of mind, they could reduce the observed effect, showing the subtle power of irrelevant events in molding voter behavior.

F. Sports and Politics in the Arab World

The influence of sports on politics, and vice versa, is not limited to Western or developed countries. In contemporary history, Egypt was the first Arab country to have participated in global sports events and competitions, notably the football World Cup in 1934. Its two most popular teams, Al-Ahly and Zamalek, have been associated with politics since their inception. Al-Ahly was founded by leader of the nationalist Wafd Party, a staunch proponent of populist, republican, anti-monarchical values. As for Zamalek, during the 1940s and until 1952, the team was renamed to “Farouk Al-Awal,” apparently as a token of appreciation to King Farouk who had supported the club. Rivals to this day, Zamalek and Al-Ahly were never fully dissociated from the political realm. While Jamal Abdel-Nasser and Anwar el Sadat were not particularly fond of the sport, they did nevertheless support it as a lucrative industry that provides a source of revenue for the government. During Mubarak’s era, however, the implications of the global intersection between politics and sports had caught up to Egypt: bidding for and staging international sports events was perceived by the political establishment to be of vital importance to emphasizing the country’s cultural and political position, particularly within the context of the Arab World’s modernization (Amara, 2014). Moreover, most other Arab nations have also developed a meaningful relationship with the sporting realm. In North Africa, countries such as Morocco have used sports as a means to celebrate national unity in the face of internal and external threats, including

the conflict pertaining to the Western Sahara. In that regard, the Moroccan athletes' notable performance at the international stage, especially in Track and Field and football, contributed to the country's political stability. Otherwise, much like other countries around the world, Arab nations have also attempted to capitalize on the international prestige aspect of the industry. In 1997, the Pan-Arab Games that were held in Beirut constituted an occasion for Lebanon to reassert its credibility in the eyes of the Arab League, after having gone through decades of civil war that wreaked havoc on the small Mediterranean country. Then-Prime Minister Rafik el-Hariri also intended for the event to spur unity among Arab countries against Israel, which he accused of destroying Lebanon. He employed his networking skills to draw the necessary investment from the Arabian Peninsula, most notably from Saudi Arabia, to erect a Sports City complex alongside a commercial center; this effort was anticipated to increase foreign investors' confidence (Amara, 2014).

More recently, political manifestations within the context of sports in the Arab world have taken on more complex forms. In Egypt, the establishment of the ultras of Al-Ahli in 2007 constituted an important event. The ultras in Egypt may best be described as a movement made up predominantly of Al-Ahli football team supporters. While officially proclaiming political neutrality, on various occasions members of this group engaged in politically-charged messages. For instance, in 2009, they raised banners and chanted slogans that were supportive of the Palestinian cause. More notably, the ultras played a key role in the Egyptian revolution; in 2011, they helped revolutionaries fend off an attack led by Mubarak and his supporters in the emblematic Tahrir Square. Standing in the front lines, thousands of ultras fought horse and camel

riders wielding whips and clubs, as well as thousands of Mubarak supporters throwing stones and Molotov cocktails at demonstrators (Tuastad, 2013).

The most relevant literature to the specific topic of this dissertation pertains to the intersection of politics and sports within the context of conflict, more specifically in conflicts that are being played out along sectarian or ethnic divides.

1. Qatar and the 2022 World Cup

Whereas utilizing sport as a tool of “soft” power meant to enhance reputational standing globally may have proven a success for some countries, often there exist factors that could lead to failure in that regard. Qatar is a prime example: For decades, the Gulf country has invested a fortune in the football realm, buying major stakes in international football teams such as Paris Saint-Germain and sponsoring others such as Bayern Munich and FC Barcelona (Sanders, 2020). Qatar’s most recent effort to enhance its image through sports has been through its bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. In theory, the small nation aims to take advantage of the tournament’s high regard to open up to various, multidimensional opportunities for itself. Typically, hosting sports mega events endows countries with the ability to showcase some of its cultural aspects, as well to enhance national pride and attract foreign capital, be it through investment in the required infrastructure or through tourism revenue (Grix & Houlihan, 2013). In Qatar’s case, not only do authorities intend to exhibit the nation’s supremacy as a microstate, but also to project ideals of peace, security and integrity, while also establishing itself as a novel tourism hub (Reiche, 2015). However, some of the practices that it has adopted to achieve this goal have drawn negative attention. For instance, undercover reports came to light with allegations that Qatar bribed FIFA

Committee members in return for more World Cup votes. In addition, stories about violations of workers' human rights were disseminated, leading to harsh criticism that threatened to disqualify Qatar from hosting the World Cup (Sanders, 2020). Brannagan & Giulianotti (2015) argue that these developments rendered the Gulf state weak and at the mercy of "soft disempowerment,": "Soft disempowerment occurs when diverse state and non-state actors –intergovernmental organizations, the media, the corporate sector and civil society groups – disseminate information which challenges or discredits the state's soft power strategies and messages" (p. 1152).

2.Football in Jordan: Controversial Preservation of National Unity

National identity in Jordan comprises two sub-national identities: On the one hand, there are the Palestinians who originate from regions west of the Jordan river. On the other, the country's indigenous inhabitants, originally from east of the river, adhere to a Transjordanian identity. Jordan's rulers have sustained their reign by allying with the Transjordanians. Because most Jordanians originated from Palestine, democratizing politics in Jordan would lead to the empowerment of Palestinians and, by association, a higher likelihood of them gaining political momentum. This potential outcome was tested during the protests that erupted in Jordan as part of the Arab Spring, which was perceived by the political regime to be a threat to national unity. Shrewdly, the ruling class has continuously made use of the ethnic divide within the local football league to send an indirect message to the population: Political stability is better than the return to civil war (one such war occurred in 1970 between the Jordanian regime and the PLO); in fact, the Jordanian political regime has rarely cracked down on the violent manifestations of ethnic divide within football stadiums, as supporters of different

teams clash over sentiment tied to their sub-national identities. For example, the Wehdat football club is viewed as the Palestinian team while the Faisaly football club is seen as the Transjordanian team. When the pair played a match chants by the Wehdat fans were hostile to Jordan's Queen Rania and were an expression of dissent on the part of the East Bank. (Tell, 2015) In doing so, it constantly reminds the population of the threat of civil war:

“... The memorization of the Jordanian civil war during football matches has a political function. By relating the democratization efforts to the Palestinian issue, and by preserving the imaginary of a possible resuscitation of communalist strife, the symbolic war at football matches serves as a social memory of the civil war which serves the political interest of those interested in preserving the political status quo” (Tuastad, 2014, p. 1785).

3. Sports in Lebanon: Fueling Sectarian Division

While much literature alludes to the unifying aspects of sports in fragmented societies, the case of Lebanon offers a counter-example. Rather than serve as an opportunity to put sectarian differences aside, sports have mirrored the country's enduring confessionalism, whereby it has proven to serve as a tool for competitiveness among the plethora of different sects. In essence, sports teams in Lebanon, especially in basketball and football, are involved in a patron-client relationship system, where they are mostly funded by political leaders on whom they become dependent and thus to whom they pledge allegiance. The manifestations of such a dependence may be felt during the matches, as supporters of distinct sectarian identities rally behind their teams, chanting slogans that refer to their religious affiliation, residential area and political

leader. Some examples include “Allah, Hariri, Tarik el Jdeedeh” (chanted by Sunni, Hariri loyalists) and “Allah, Nasrallah, will Dahieh Killa” (chanted by mostly Shiite Hezbollah supporters) (Reiche, 2011).

G. The Syrian National Football Team during the Civil War

1. Conflict and Sports in Syria

Scholarly articles exploring the relationship between sports and politics in Syria are rare, particularly in the context of the recent Syrian civil war. Andrea Stanton (2014) examined the participation of Syrian athletes in international and regional sporting events. She argues that historically Damascus sent its athletes to the Olympics not to bring back the gold medal, necessarily, but as a ‘sign of statehood.’ Syria, particularly under the Assad dynasty, was much more interested in regional sporting events like the Pan-Arab Games and the Mediterranean Games. Damascus hosted the Pan-Arab Games in 1976 in Latakia and hosted the Mediterranean Games in Tartous in 1987, events which allowed the regime of Hafiz al-Assad a stage on which to show off its narrative to the world (Stanton 2014).

“More than signaling the country’s independence as a nation-state, participation in the Olympic, Pan-Arab, and Mediterranean Games, among others, may be taken as a sign of the Assad government’s ability to maintain ‘normal’ priorities despite the conflict” (Stanton 2014,p.22).

His son Bashar sent Syrian athletes to participate in international sporting events to project to the world a sense of normalcy, despite the political turmoil at home. The games were a method for the Assad government to also project the sentiment that they are still in control of the country.

Reflecting on the first few years of the conflict, Armenak Tokmajyan (2016) recounts how the political implications of the war fast became apparent. Depending on the city or region that they represented, teams were forced to take sides with or against the Syrian regime; many would not do so and even declined to play for the national team to avoid being perceived as political tainted. Tragically, some players such as those who played for the Homs-based team al-Wathbah, perished in a mortar attack outside their hotel as they were preparing to train. Others like promising goalkeeper Abdelbasset Saroot chose to take a stand, joining demonstrations in Homs, which prompted the Syrian government to launch an accusation against him, labeling him a Salafi extremist and banning him from the game; they even put a two-million Syrian pound bounty on his arrest. Moreover, it was not just the regime who rewarded or punished players depending on their affiliations; rather, in July of 2016, reports came out that ISIS had beheaded four football players who had belonged to the al-Shabab squad. Perceived as un-Islamic by the terrorist organization, football was frowned upon and thus there were multiple suicide attempts at football stadiums.

Somehow, the Syrian national football team managed to get through these tragedies. Eli Meixler (2017) writes in Time magazine that as Syria was still feeling the deleterious effects of an enduring civil war, the team nevertheless performed well in the qualification stages of the 2018 World Cup. In October of 2017, it had already managed to draw against heavyweights like Iran and South Korea, in addition to beating teams like Uzbekistan, Qatar, and China. They managed to finish third in their qualifying group, despite the fact that the team played their home games in Malaysia due to sanctions on Syria placed by FIFA and security fears which rendered training sessions dangerous and potentially deadly (Conway and Lockwood 2017). So impressive was the

team's performance in this period that by the first few months of 2018, they had managed to soar five ranks on the official FIFA ranking scale: 73rd internationally compared to 78th when the monthly ranking began in 1993 ("Syrian Football Team", 2018). As of December of 2019, the Syrian national team's FIFA rank had dropped back to 81st place ("FIFA/Coca-Cola World Ranking", 2021).

However, the relationship between the Syrian national football team and the Syrian population could be described as shaky at best, as the "Qasioun Eagles" were mired in political controversy. While most of its players, including notably striker Firas Khatib, denied having any specific political affiliations and claimed to represent all Syrian citizens, local journalists argue that Khatib's statements ought to be taken with a grain of salt, seeing as there are seemingly no independent institutions in Syria, including sporting establishments. In fact, the team's behavior in the qualification round indicates that the Syrian regime was adamant on exploiting its success. After the match with Iran, the players assembled on Syria state television to laud Al-Assad and thank him for his support, in what McGowan (2017) argues was an "eerie demonstration of the cult of personality that surrounds the Assad regime" (para. 12).

For many, the perceived toxic relationship between the national team and the Syrian regime compelled them to root for opponents, even during the defining game against Australia, where, had the team won, it would have qualified to the World Cup for the first time. It lost. Thus, on one hand, proponents of the Syrian regime rooted for the national team; on the other hand, the opposition did not, effectively projecting the country's conflict onto the sporting realm.

2. The Influence of External Actors

External actors involved in the Syrian national team's activity in the sporting realm have adopted a predominantly neutral, albeit encouraging approach vis-à-vis the Syrian civil war. In an article published on January 14, 2020, FIFA itself highlighted its supportive role aimed at assisting Syrian national teams in maintaining the football game. While the organization stated that it only deemed it appropriate to send a mission to Syria in 2020, eight years after its last delegation in 2012, it nevertheless also aided the Syrian football teams when they participated in international competitions, providing them with airfare and accommodation sponsored by the FIFA Forward development program. It is also worth noting that FIFA sent delegates to serve as observers at the Syrian Football Association (SFA) Elective Congress ("Syria Welcomes First FIFA", 2020). Another external actor, the International Olympic Committee (IOC), reportedly aided a group of Syrian athletes during the civil war, but opted to send the funds directly to these athletes, as opposed to funneling them through the Syrian National Olympic Committee (NOC). Nevertheless, the NOC, based in the Syrian capital Damascus, was still recognized by the IOC in 2012 (Grohmann, 2012). A year into the Syrian conflict, the international committee's director of relations with national Olympic committees Peter Niro described the NOC as being "autonomous" and "independent," despite some of its officials holding high state-level positions ("IOC Working", 2012). It is also worth mentioning the remarkable contrast between the IOC's rather favorable stance toward a national committee, which came in contrast with some football players' concerns at the time. For instance, in an interview with ITV news, former goalkeeper Saroot claimed that most Syrian athletes did not even wish to participate in the Olympics, but rather were coerced into doing so out of fear that they would be punished otherwise ("Olympics – Syrians", 2012). The Syrian government

sent ten athletes, three women and seven men (Aji,2012) to the 2012 Olympics (Milmo, 2012) and seven, four men and three women, to the 2016 Olympics (Ismail, 2016).

To the 2012 London Summer Games, the Syrian government sent ten people to compete, the biggest delegation since the 1980 Moscow Games. The participating Syrians got their funding from the ICO rather than NOC to make sure that they were not treated as parts of Assad's government and therefore be subject to sanctions. That was the fate that befell NOC's chief Mowafak Joumaa, as the United Kingdom, the host of the games, denied him a visa after deciding that he constituted an active figure within Assad's military apparatus (Stanton, 2014).

Yusra Mardini, a Syrian, was the first person to represent the refugee team at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, a year after she was forced to swim to save her own life (BBC, 2016).

At the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, Man Asaad lifted a total of 424kg and won his country a bronze medal, its first since clinching the bronze in boxing in 2004 (AFP, 2021). Six people participated under the Syrian flag in the 2020 Tokyo Olympics. They included 12-year-old Hind Zaza, a table tennis player and the youngest participant in the Olympics since 1968. But they were not the only Syrians participating in those events. Several other Syrians participated with 29-member Olympic refugee team which included refugees from

Syria, South Sudan, Eritrea, Afghanistan and Iran. It was almost three times larger than the first refugee team to participate in the Olympics in Rio 2016 (Reuters, 2021).

Two Syrian brothers thus found themselves competing under different banners. Although both are Syrian refugees residing in Germany, one participated under the Syrian flag while the other under the Olympic refugee team. Their image embracing went viral and was seen as symbolic of the plight of the Syrian people (AFP, 2021).

H. Research Gap

There is a clear dearth in academic literature on the intertwinement of sports and politics in Syria, particularly within the context of the civil war and its implications for the ruling regime. This dissertation looks to fill this gap by conducting a thorough political analysis of the relationship between the authoritarian Syrian regime and the Syrian national football team during the events of the Syrian civil war.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter begins by discussing the reaction of authoritarian regimes in the Arab world to the waves of democratization that occurred in previous decades. It then provides a thorough account of Heydemann's theory of authoritarian upgrading, before offering an account of the Syrian regime's attempts to reconstruct its authoritarian system following wartime disruption.

A. Authoritarian Resilience and the Failure of Democratization in the Arab World

The Middle East is no stranger to authoritarian regimes. In fact, the region has for long sustained the highest concentration of such regimes in the world (Clark & Salloukh, 2008), even amid an international wave of democratization. In the years spanning 1974 to 1990, the number of democratic governments globally increased two-fold; yet, Middle Eastern authoritarian regimes were resilience during this time albeit without stubbornly resisting change. In the 1970s, many authoritarian leaders in the region willingly instated political and economic reforms, allowed some space for opposition groups to maneuver, and established multiparty systems with relatively free electoral processes (Bölme, 2015). Nevertheless, these limited changes were not meant to yield any significant alterations to political structure per se; furthermore, they were annulled following the economic crises that gripped the Middle East in the 1980s and the popular uprising that ensued. In the early 1990s, just after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Middle East witnessed yet another wave of political liberalization, particularly in the wake of efforts to promote democratic processes in the region by the

United States and other Western powers (Clark & Salloukh, 2008). However, such efforts would still end up in vain:

“The democracy promotion of the West... did not lead to democracy; it helped restrain its emergence. The authoritarian leaders of the Middle East used these aids and the reintroduction of elections as a tool to consolidate their power. Many regimes manipulated elections. If they were defeated at the ballot box in spite of these manipulations, they canceled the elections, banned the opposition and arrested the opposition members. As a result, this short period of ‘democratization’ was followed by the reassertion of authoritarianism” (Bölme, 2016, pp. 7-8).

It was not until 2010 that the democratization momentum was fervently revived in the wake of the Arab Spring, beginning with Tunisia. One Arab country after another witnessed mass protests that seemingly foreshadowed the fall of authoritarian regimes and the emergence of democratic alternatives. Some gains were made, including the rise of new political parties and improvements in electoral transparency and credibility. Moreover, increased citizen awareness, demand for accountability and overall political consciousness constituted encouraging signs that the Middle East was progressively on its way to greener political pastures (Makdisi, 2017). However, that period was short-lived, and optimistic attitudes regarding democratization potential faded within a few years. Indeed, while some countries were disappointing in that regard, like Egypt and Libya where the political situation remained precarious, other cases like Syria proved far worse: What started as a peaceful Syrian uprising quickly turned into the region’s greatest tragedy, as the regime of Al-Assad cracked down on protestors using extreme violence. The country swiftly descended into civil war (Bölme, 2016), thereby ending all hope of democratization and plunging the nation into disarray and uncertainty.

B. Authoritarian Upgrading: A Theoretical Framework

1. Adapt or Perish: The Construction of “Hybrid” Authoritarian Governance Models

After the dust settled in the Arab world, it became apparent that, in the span of a few decades, a novel model of authoritarian governance had taken shape. In essence, instead of ceding power or at least genuinely attempting to implement reforms, Arab regimes instead exploited the waves of democratization to adapt, in trial-and-error fashion, to political reform pressures. Heydemann (2007) describes the phenomenon as authoritarian “upgrading,” entailing the efforts of authoritarian regimes to absorb internal and external influences rather than fight them off. Essentially, Arab regimes selectively adapted to emerging demands for economic liberalization and the incorporation of local economies into international markets; they also took advantage of the ongoing changes to create and broaden opportunities for society’s elites. Heydemann notes that these regimes even took steps that would appear to be antithetical to their prospects for survival in a more globalized world, including facilitating access to decentralized and democratized technological tools such as the internet, which was previously resisted for fear of spreading democratic ideas. Moreover, these regimes married their authoritarian governance with the practical improvements of reinforcing public services and state capacity, as well as reforming the labor market and educational sector. Additionally, instead of closing off their economies through protectionist policies, authoritarian governments sought out investments, trade and political relationships with other nations; in particular, they warmed up to countries that they perceived would sympathize with their political concerns, including the Arab monarchies of the Gulf and China, while also maintaining ties with the West: “This is not a ‘zero sum game’ for these Arab regimes. They continue to enhance their

commercial relationships with European Union countries and the United States. Yet, the diversification of their economic and political relationships generates new sources of leverage for Arab regimes in an international system dominated by the United States, even while diminishing the West's economic and diplomatic influence" (Heydemann, 2007, p. 1). As such, authoritarian upgrading avoids isolating Arab societies from the forces of globalization as well as social, economic and political change; rather, it consists of adapting authoritarian governance to evolving conditions.

Adopted by Arab autocrats to confront obstacles to their rule in the late 20th century, authoritarian upgrading in the Middle East has matured and quickened in pace, augmented primarily by the failure of democratization efforts in the region. In particular, autocrats have exploited the failure of Western powers to bring about positive regime change in Arab countries like Iraq and Libya, adopting and disseminating the narrative that the promotion of democracy is synonymous to governmental collapse, as well as political and social violence.

At its core, authoritarian upgrading is concerned with the sustenance of authoritarian governance in an era of global democratization. However, Heydemann (2007) asserts that there does not exist a single model or blueprint of authoritarian upgrading employed by different autocratic regimes. Rather, he argues that the evolution of this phenomenon is contingent on a process of "authoritarian learning" involving the diffusion and sharing of information across multiple authoritarian regimes: "Lessons and strategies that originate within, and outside the Middle East, are diffused across the region, traveling from regime to regime and being modified in the process. Regimes learn from one another, often through explicit sharing of experiences" (p. 2). In that regard, one of the main lessons absorbed by authoritarian regimes in the

Middle East was the viability of establishing hybrid forms of authoritarian governance that would sustain political control while improving economic performance (Lust-Okar, 2006), thereby killing two birds with one stone. These hybrid systems are characterized as being flexible, open and adaptable. However, they have also maintained a strong element of coercion that serves to keep society in line as much as possible with the aspirations and the whims of the ruling regimes. In essence, Arab authoritarian regimes have indeed sacrificed the totalitarian, maximalist tendencies of the past, opening limited space for opposition parties, civil societies and liberty of press. They have also recognized the legitimacy of human rights. However, they have also maintained their ruthless policing of the boundaries of what is accepted as political practice and what is not (Diamond, 2002). For instance, while successive Egyptian governments seemingly endowed opposition groups and activists with freedom of speech and assembly, they nevertheless consistently cracked down on them when they felt threatened. In 2006, Egyptian authorities declared the renewal of emergency laws, endowing security agencies with extraordinary powers that were used to suppress opposing viewpoints and activism. Not only did this lead to delayed elections and the arrest of hundreds of opposition group members such as those belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood, but it also resulted in the stifling of student and labor union elections (Al-Anani, 2015). In North African Arab countries, similar oppression was experienced by civil society figures, including reporters and internet activists. Even in Morocco whose success in political and societal reform is often hailed, the steps taken to transition toward a democratic regime have been criticized by scholars (Ottaway & Reilly, 2006) as being tantamount to the reconfiguration of authoritarianism. While less severe than in other countries, human rights abuses and repression are still common in the country.

2. The Core Tenets of Authoritarian Upgrading

Heydemann (2007) observes that there are five core features of authoritarian upgrading: appropriating and containing civil societies, managing political contestation, capturing the benefits of selective economic reforms, controlling new communication technologies, and diversifying international linkages.

One of the core objectives of authoritarian upgrading is the exploitation –rather than the resistance to– socioeconomic and political trends. The dual aim is to inhibit the challenges inherent in these trends and to increase the regime’s political capital in such a way to sustain its hold on power. In practice, one of the most successful ways of doing so has been to appropriate and contain civil society. In the 1980s, civil society organizations in the Arab world began to thrive. In particular, Arab non-governmental organizations (NGOs) became highly active in fields such as political reform, transparency of governance, human rights, women’s rights, and environmental conservation. Initially, Arab authoritarian regimes perceived this development as being a convenient means through which they could draw in international financial aid, soft loans and donations, as well as enhance their reputation in the eyes of the international community. However, as NGOs mushroomed, the weight of civil societies increased, prompting Arab regimes to reconsider their openness to such organizations. Instead of shutting down civil societies altogether, regimes gradually limited their influence through the adoption of intricate strategies aimed at reasserting control over growing civic sectors. These strategies included a set of decisions aimed to repress, regulate, coopt and appropriate NGO functions in such a way to diminish their ability to challenge political authority (Abdelrahman, 2004). Among organizations most targeted

were those dealing with government accountability, electoral reform and human rights. While some measures were explicitly oppressive, such as intimidating and harassing leading political activists, others were subtler and more systemic in nature, like reforming legal frameworks that govern NGOs in a way that they became more liable to governmental interventions and disruption (Moore & Salloukh, 2007). Herein lies the “hybrid” balance at the microscopic level: Without altogether banning or criminalizing NGOs, Arab regimes made it far more difficult for them to operate unhindered. For instance, in some countries like Jordan and Morocco, laws pertaining to fields such as counterterrorism and media control were altered in such a way to facilitate state intervention into NGO activity, loosening the criteria that justified such intervention (Scwedler, 2002). Moreover, while these legal alterations endowed Arab authoritarian regimes with room to utilize their coercive powers to repress their civil societies, nevertheless this repression came at a cost: Reputational risk. In fact, the suppression of independent NGOs often engendered severe criticism from Western powers, prompting regimes, yet again, to adopt different, more cunning tactics:

“To fend off this scrutiny, coercion has been supplemented by additional strategies through which regimes exploit the rhetoric and organizational frameworks of civil society to generate political resources that can be appropriated and used to their advantage. In Egypt, Jordan and Syria, for example, regime elites have become visible sponsors of semi-official NGOs that enjoy protected status, benefit from privileged relations with powerful political actors, but lack meaningful autonomy. These tend to be in service provision, education, training, sports, youth development, and other areas that are seen as apolitical and therefore non-threatening.” (Heydemann, 2007, p. 8)

Critically, Arab regimes have often not only sponsored these semi-official NGOs but also themselves internalized and appropriated certain roles, such as watchdog and advocacy functions, thereby obstructing authentic efforts to mobilize and encourage civic engagement, while simultaneously aiming to improve their legitimacy (Bank, 2004).

The second core feature of authoritarian upgrading suggested by Heydemann is the management of political contestation. At the turn of the 21st century, it appeared as the Arab world had successfully undergone extensive progress related to liberalization and democratization, including electoral reforms that updated existing laws in such a way as to enhance voter participation, strengthen the administration and oversight of elections and alleviate restrictions on political rivalry (Hawthorne, 2004). Indeed, there were early signs of success that looked promising. In 2005, Egyptian parliamentary elections yielded 88 seats in favor of the Muslim Brotherhood (Shehata & Stacher, 2006), thereby presenting a challenge for the ruling regime. In a similar vein, in 2007 parliamentary elections in Morocco resulted in the victory of 47 candidates belonging to the Justice and Development Party. Although Western political figures praised these developments, Heydemann (2007) argues that the implemented reforms were less geared toward democratization and more toward safeguarding authoritarianism from political contestation. In fact, Arab regimes acted in such a way as to limit the potential for political opposition by, again, enforcing restrictions within the boundaries of the law, and exploiting various instruments as a means to the end of dominating electoral outcomes and distorting them in their favor. Heydemann asserts that for decades, opposition political figures in the Arab world were repressed on the basis of dodgy legal arguments and accusations, often imprisoned on dubious charges. In many Arab

countries such as Syria, Egypt and Algeria, governments have operated extensively emergency security laws that are supposed to be temporary. They exploited these extraordinary measures to expose opposition parties and leaders to charges of treason, subversion, and violation of emergency statutes. Moreover, authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have proven adept at manipulating legal frameworks to disorganize and fragment political opposition. Not only do they subject them to arbitrary regulation, but they also hinder the establishment of new political parties and their financing. In addition, these regimes typically limit the opposition's access to media outlets, condoning primarily media campaigns that shed a negative light on opposition figure (Koehler, 2017). Such measures are often complemented by other, equally repressive actions that serve to distort electoral outcomes. For instance, authoritarian regimes typically abuse state authority to discourage voter participation, using a diverse array of fear tactics, including an excessive show of force at polling stations or even outright attacks on voters. Additionally, they often resort to fraudulent activity such as vote-buying (Heydemann, 2007). However, arguably the biggest asset that authoritarian regimes have is their obfuscation of the state as a whole, in the sense that over the years/decades, they purposely worked to render the state and its resources indistinguishable from the ruling parties themselves. While sometimes difficult to detect, this juxtaposition helps authoritarian ruling parties to exploit state resources for their own benefit, not just to sustain networks of patronage (and by extension voter loyalty), but also to offer themselves an unfair advantage in elections. For instance, electoral commissions, judges and observers often comprise ruling party supporters; vote counts, as well as complaints about abuse and bias in the voting process are also often overseen by partisan officials (Carothers, 2002).

Furthermore Heydemann (2007) makes a crucial point that even as room for political contestation broadens, authoritarian regimes have succeeded in normalizing the process of making *ad hoc* adjustments to critical practices such as political organization and elections. In other words, any progress made by activists politically does not challenge the core design of the political process, which is itself highly biased in favor of the regime. This reinforces the ability of Arab regimes to manage political contestation by maintaining stubborn and deeply-entrenched systemic flaws.

Another core tenet of authoritarian upgrading involves regimes' exploitation of economic openness and the changes that it has brought in the context of a more inclusive, globalized economy. Heydemann (2004) argues that throughout the Arab world, the wave of economic liberalization took on different meanings in the public domain on one hand, and in narrower regime circles on the other. For regular citizens, particularly those belonging to the upper socioeconomic classes, economic openness enabled a myriad of investment opportunities in connection with global markets. However, for the regime, it constituted a chance to pursue a selective course of economic reforms, one that would be more advantageous to the ruling parties and their base, thereby reinforcing the social base of authoritarianism and mitigating pressures for comprehensive socioeconomic reforms. In essence, in tandem with *some* meaningful enhancements in a few economic indicators, selective reforms allowed regimes in Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria to maintain systems of governance that persistently depend on patronage networks. In addition, these limited reforms co-opted important segments of the private sector that were inclined to be in favor of selective economic liberalization practices. These tactics allowed politically-connected businessmen and their connections throughout the regime's bureaucratic network to

serve their own financial interests without placing any emphasis on accountability, transparency and democratization of access to economic opportunities that typically complement more all-inclusive economic reform strategies (Sfakianakis, 2004). Proof of these tactics is present across the Arab world, most notably in the privatization of lucrative, state-owned assets. For instance, in Syria, the license to run the country's first private telecommunication enterprise, Syriatel, was awarded to President Bashar el-Asad's cousin, Rami Makhlouf. In other countries like neighboring Jordan, the same occurred, albeit with more competition among the politically-connected business elite; in the end, a consortium was awarded the license, run by former political and security officials with the American company Motorola as a foreign partner (Wils, 2004). Here, Heydemann (2007) makes a very pertinent observation with regard to the spillover effects engendered by the economic alliance between Arab regimes and business élites, which involve "opportunities such reforms provide to larger networks of business actors that circulate on the margins of the leading business families and their political allies. Though less visible, these larger networks are no less important politically. If small-scale manufacturers, traders, and retailers benefit far less from selective reforms than do their more influential counterparts, they are nonetheless significant constituencies for authoritarian regimes that continue to claim a role as defenders of the economic interests of workers and the middle class" (p. 15). Moreover, selective economic reforms have also proven to have an international dimension for authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Aside from improving their domestic standing, these reforms also enabled ruling parties to take advantage of their newly established international connections to insert their clients and allies into positions of global visibility and influence (Heydemann, 2007).

On the subject of international connections, another means through which authoritarian regimes have shown resilience and adaptability is through the establishment of international diplomatic, trade and investment relationships that help to protect them from the pressure exerted on them by international organizations and Western powers. For instance, Arab regimes have consistently sought out relationships with countries in Asia and the Persian Gulf, including the Arab monarchies such as Saudi Arabia. The reason is that unlike Western nations, countries in these regions are less prone to pressure authoritarian regimes to comply with comprehensive reform agendas and other aspects such as human rights. Thus, Arab regimes effectively exploited an emerging opportunity: The rise of newly competitive markets which they could leverage to push back against otherwise potent Western influence (Heydemann, 2007). For instance, after the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, Assad became the prime suspect in the murder (Kifner & Hoge, 2005), as Western pressure mounted on the Syrian regime, leading to the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanese territory. However, Syria still managed to fend off French and American attempts to isolate it not only by using leverage based on its regional ties with countries like Russia, Iran and some Gulf States, but also by taking modest steps that seemed to appease the European Union (Schenker, 2008). Moreover, most Arab regimes have come to develop close ties with the Chinese government, which is notorious for its lower standards and expectations regarding democratic governance and reforms, as well as human rights. In particular, the Gulf have endeavored to sign oil and gas deals with the Chinese state that provide them with leverage in the form of strong bilateral ties and reduced dependence on Western investments. In late 2001, former Secretary General of the Arab League, Amr Moussa, attended a ceremony in Beijing

where senior Chinese officials inaugurated a pact between China and Arab states that was firmly based on a policy of non-interference in member states' internal affairs. This policy was reaffirmed a few years later upon signing cooperation agreements at the Sino-Arab Cooperation Forum (Movlavi, 2007). Evidently, the Chinese connection has played a pivotal part in the establishment of resilience hybrid authoritarian regimes in the Arab world, as China effectively entered the Middle East not just through political, diplomatic ties, but also via extensive economic investment that spanned the whole region, as opposed to just Gulf States. In fact, between 2000 and 2006, bilateral trade between China and Syria rose to \$1.5 billion from just \$100 million. Moreover, in 2007, both countries came to an agreement on economic cooperation where Syria formally recognized that the Chinese economy had met many of the standards of the World Trade Organization ("Befriending Beijing", 2007). In addition, through its promotion of its own financial organizations in the MENA, including the Export-Import Bank of China, the Chinese government not only cemented its presence in the region, but also began to adopt practices that challenged the funding of its Western counterparts known to condition investments and loans on borrowers' commitment to the standards of performance, transparency, and accountability (Naim, 2007).

Although Heydemann's (2007) work predates the events of the Arab Spring, its tenets offer valuable insights into the factors that obstructed the Arab Spring uprisings across the Middle East. Coupling Heydemann's framework with the historical sociology (HS) perspective enables a thorough dissection of why these uprisings failed or at most had very limited gains despite having shown great promise and momentum at their peak. HS frames post-uprising outcomes as being the products of "path dependency," referring to the way that historically-successful systems and events are often

reproduced, even amid novel circumstances (Hinnebusch, 2010). A historical overview of authoritarianism in the Middle East indicates that certain characteristics or tactics used to establish authoritarian regimes over time have persisted, namely the mix of charismatic and bureaucratic authority that helped to establish the earliest forms of populist authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser is one such example (Hinnebusch, 2015). As it evolved from that point, authoritarianism sustained its base of bureaucratic authority, developing more patrimonial tendencies in the post-populist era. More importantly, unlike in other parts of the world, power struggles in the MENA regions did not benefit from favorable political economy structures. Whereas inclusive democratization is typically contingent on a balance of class power, including an alliance of the bourgeois class with the organized working that challenges the state, no such conducive dynamics have ever existed in the Arab world. Rather, the region's rentier states have yielded bourgeoisies and clientelistic networks that depend on the state to thrive. Moreover, in some cases, this political economy structure is accompanied and reinforced by expatriate labor, forced to seek opportunities abroad because limited ones back home (Stephan, 2009). Critically, the waves of democratization experienced by the MENA region, which encompassed international pressures on Arab regimes to implement neo-liberal "structural adjustments", had a detrimental overall effect on these countries. In particular, neoliberal policies gave rise to new state-crony capitalist coalitions that continued to exclude labor while deepening the reliance on international finance capital (Hinnebusch, 2015). Whereas the Arab uprisings were – in part – a reaction to this development, they nevertheless made Arab nations even more vulnerable to global finance capital. By extension, authoritarian regimes were empowered by the lack of attention awarded to

justice in wealth distribution. As these regimes adopted selective economic reforms and exploited their power to enhance their global reputational standing and influence, they sustained a substantial advantage over protesters:

“...this revolutionary mass activist, at best, infuses elites with new blood from below...Even if there are competitive elections elites’ disproportionate command of resources – control of information, bureaucratic levels of command – enables them to defend and recover their domination against the normally divided or inattentive masses. From the point of view of classical political sociology, failures of or limits to democratization, far from being anomalies, are reflections of the ‘iron law of oligarchy’”. (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 11)

Indeed, hybrid authoritarian regimes persisted in the post-uprising period. With democratization conditions lacking, authoritarian ruling parties were reinvigorated. A prime example is Bashar al-Assad’s Syria.

C. The Reconstruction of Authoritarianism in Post-Conflict Syria

Unlike other Arab spring countries throughout the Middle East, Syria’s uprising, which began in 2011, quickly turned into a full-on, very violent civil war. Typically, civil wars are understood to be associated with detrimental consequences for state authority, particularly with regard to political and economic fragmentation (Heydemann, 2018). In Syria’s case, the unfolding events initially seemed destabilizing to Assad’s authoritarian regime, as rebel and insurgent actors threatened the displacement of state institutions. However, years into the conflict, the assumed rupture in political and economic governance that would accompany the violence did not materialize. Rather, wartime economic orders sustained a continuity with pre-war

economic activity: “In many important respects... civil war in Syria amplified and expanded the predatory, illicit, and corrupt economic logics and practices that were commonplace before 2011.” (Heydemann, 2020, para 10). These legacy effects flowing from the political economy of Syria under both Assad regimes highlight the extent to which wartime economic orders are influenced by and sustain pre-war economic practices (Heydemann, 2018). Before the war, the Syrian regime had already exhibited a culture of corruption, embracing crony capitalism where transparency and accountability were severely lacking. Crony capitalism describes an economic system characterized by a close-knit relationship between the state, labor and big business. In this system it is the rulers that determine who receives the economic gains. (Zywicki, 2016)

As part of the corruption, civilian elites were frequently involved in illicit activity aimed at enriching themselves at the expense of the broader population. Indeed, state-regime-business relations thrived, encompassing strong ties with the Syrian military establishment, itself a potent economic agent (Haddad, 2012). In essence, the authoritarian Syrian regime had effectively induced long-term mistrust in the private sector, rendering private economic activity controllable by, and vulnerable to, state authority intervention (Heydemann, 2018). Moreover, the war engendered highly localized economic orders that split from centralized control, prompting the regime to withdraw from many Syrian regions occupied by opposition forces. However, as the regime gradually regained control over these areas, it became clearer that the regime would not have to deal with challenges to its pre-war economic order as serious as many had imagined. In fact, opposition groups had effectively reproduced the regime’s corrupt and predatory economic activities in their regions of influence, forcing their

authority over the population there through the use of personalistic networks of economic exchange (Abboud, 2017).

Still, the authoritarian Syrian regime did encounter various challenges to the re-imposition of its total authority over the country. For one, it had to delicately balance the economic interests and ambitions of established cronies and businessmen who had traveled away from the country during times of extreme conflict, with those of new regime cronies that participated in wartime economic practices on behalf of the regime (Abboud, 2017). Secondly, the regime was faced with the difficult task of reestablishing its authority even over loyalist forces spread out across the country. For years, these forces had semi-autonomous control over their local territory, employing predatory and criminal strategies to legalize their usurpation of real estate, run intricate smuggling networks, and dominate protection rackets whose objective it was to extract bribes from businesses. They also policed local economies to keep any competitors at bay, preventing displaced individuals from returning, and marginalizing local residents who expressed sympathy toward the opposition (Heydemann, 2018). Third, after recapturing occupied areas, the Syrian regime found itself in a position where it had to engage in the economic reintegration of these areas previously controlled by the opposition, a tricky task considering the political sensitivities involved. Fourth, Assad has had to contend with the challenge of balancing the economic interests of the state's foreign patrons against its ambitions to reassert itself as sovereign over all of pre-2011 Syria: "Officials in Iran and Russia have expressed a sense of entitlement to priority in the award of reconstruction contracts. Both governments pursue their economic interests in Syria on the presumption of impunity and autonomy, if not outright authority over the Assad regime" (Heydemann, 2018).

Thus, while the Assad regime survived the bloody civil war that challenged his reign since 2011, it did nevertheless find itself in a precarious position when it comes to the reconstruction of its hybrid authoritarian system. It makes sense, then, to assume that during and in the aftermath of hostilities, the regime did not spare any measure to at least soften the blow to the viability of its authoritarian system of rule.

This chapter presented an overview of the resilience of Arab regimes in the Middle East in the face of liberalization trends. It discussed the underlying factors behind their ability to maintain their hybrid authoritarian systems. Moreover, it thoroughly reviewed Heydemann's theoretical framework of authoritarian upgrading, focusing on 4 out of 5 of its core features that are most pertinent to this thesis' focus. Finally, literature on the process of reconstructing authoritarianism in Syria in the post-war period was reviewed.

CHAPTER IV

METHADODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodology adopted to fulfil the thesis' objectives, beginning with the underlying philosophy. Justification is provided for the employment of the research paradigm and approach. In addition, the rationale is elicited behind the use of the research instrument, sampling method, data collection and data analysis.

A. Research Philosophy

The aim of this thesis is to explore the relationship between politics in times of conflict and the Syrian national football team, tapping into the insight of figures affiliated with the team who have lived through the country's civil war, exposed to the associated conditions that accompanied this historical event. Thus, it was decided that the interpretivist paradigm constitutes the most suitable philosophy underlying the research. Indeed, drawing meaning from the experiences of such key actors necessitates the researcher to interpret the data obtained from a subjective lens that takes into consideration participants' socially-constructed reality. In doing so, the researcher may more accurately capture and reconstruct the self-understandings of the actors (Chowdhury, 2014) engaged in a position as unique as that of football players, coaches and administrative figures who have worked under remarkably challenging circumstances. Indeed, the only way to understand the effect of turbulent political and military events on the Syrian national football team's is through the adoption of the interpretive approach, constructing meaning from the relevant knowledge and experiences of the main stakeholders, including – first and foremost – the players,

trainers, and other staff that have lived through almost a decade of civil strife, while having to focus on maintaining and even strengthening the performance of the team.

B. Research Design

1. Approach

In line with the interpretivist paradigm, the thesis adopted a qualitative research design that seeks to elicit the Syrian national team's status in relation to the authoritarian regime during the country's recent civil war. In the previous chapter, authoritarian upgrading was presented as a guiding theoretical framework through which to explore the possible role that national sports may play in the authoritarian resilience/sustainability of the Syrian regime. However, this theory was by no means meant to be a basis for a hypothesis that the researcher would then test through the study of the Syrian national football team's experience in times of conflict. Rather, the exploration of this unique phenomenon in the Arab world lends itself to a more inductive case study, contextualizing the primary data within the core tenets of authoritarian upgrading to determine if and how the team was instrumentalized by the Syrian regime for political purposes related to authoritarian reconstruction. As such, this case would best be explored by adopting a grounded theory approach, focusing on a thorough assessment of the primary data to induce theory *generation* rather than verification (Becker & Kaufmann, 2012).

2. Instrument

Semi-structured interviews constitute the most suitable instrument through which to solicit nuanced information from participants. This type of interview was

chosen for being the most effective in case studies where the researcher is not only venturing into uncharted territory, but also requires a high level of flexibility in his/her approach to the solicitation of participant feedback (Adams, 2015). This sort of flexibility was needed in the interviews with Syrian national football team figures for a few reasons. First, since the interviews were conducted in Arabic, there was substantial room for nuances needing clarification and thus requiring follow-up queries. Moreover, since the study was inherently exploratory, it was predetermined that some questions may need to be omitted, tweaked or made more specific/elicited in more detail depending on participants' reactions/inquiries. The preliminary list of interviewees may be consulted in *Appendix B*.

3. Sample

Only one sampling method used to recruit participants to the study was deemed feasible: Snowball sampling. Given the very narrow scope of individuals affiliated with the Syrian national football team, the researcher began first by using his networking assets to obtain the phone contact of an ex-player and coach. Subsequently, the first participant was asked about the possibility of him providing further contacts that would be willing to participate in the study, so on so forth... A total of 12 participants were interviewed. For confidentiality purposes, their names are not mentioned. In tandem with the collection of primary data through interviews conducted with key figures from the Syrian national football team, local and international secondary articles from the press were explored, spanning multiple years that coincide with eventful periods pertaining both to the Syrian civil war and the Syrian national team's sporting engagements; key information retrieved from these press sources was used to enhance

the researcher's interpretation of the primary data by contextualizing it within the broader scope of overarching developments.

4. Data Collection

Data collection was undertaken via phone calls with all participants, for blatant reasons. First, the researcher could not feasibly be in the physical presence of respondents considering that most of them reside in Syria. In addition, with COVID-19 restrictions being in full effect on a global scale, travelling to Syria to conduct the interviews was not an option. Regardless, previous research (Cachia & Millward, 2011) found that semi-structured interviews and the telephone medium are a complementary fit. A total of 12 interviews were conducted. On average, each interview took 18 minutes from start to finish. To assuage fears, the researcher did not record the interviews but typed notes while talking with the subjects. The content of each interview was translated to English before commencing data analysis.

5. Data Analysis

Once all interviews were transcribed, thematic content analysis was conducted by following a rigorous process of open and axial coding, typically used in grounded theory. The first stage consisted of open coding, whereby the researcher thoroughly went over the transcribed interviews three times to familiarize himself with the content, then proceeded to highlight passages related by context, spanning all research questions to check for any overlapping responses. Subsequently, axial coding was undertaken to organize the coded data into thematic categories. These categories were then used as a

basis for the discussion, linking them where relevant to pertinent information found in the secondary sources.

6. Ethical Considerations

In line with standard ethical practices of political science research, all participants involved in the study were first informed in full about the objective and scope of the research, as well as the extent of their role as providers of primary data. In addition, they were made aware that they could opt out of the research not just before data collection begins, but also during the process if they feel uncomfortable making any further contributions. Lastly, participants were ensured that the data collected would be used for the sole purpose of advancing knowledge on the subject of study, and that it would be completely anonymized to preserve their privacy.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the results of the primary research and contextualizes them within the findings of relevant secondary sources. The discussion is organized by theme in accordance with a thorough assessment and interpretation of participant responses and auxiliary data obtained from relevant secondary sources.

A. Controlling the Political Narrative: Unity in the Fight for the Nation

A recurrent theme in participant responses was that of unity and solidarity (in the face of hardship and terrorism). The second participant interviewed, an ex-coach, was particularly adamant on voicing his belief that all players on the team either had no political affiliations, or had at least relegated them to the back of their priorities; he made sure to stress that “all people from all provinces and all religions stood by the Syrian team, and this really united the Syrians, and made football a unifying force”, adding that “the only thing that would unify [the players] is the love of the country and the love of the sport and the desire to achieve results”. This sentiment was echoed by the majority of respondents; one league official even claimed that “sports is the only unifying thing in Syria and everyone is behind the national team. There are very few people against it. The national team... is trying to bring people together and make reconciliations”. Moreover, one current team administrator admitted that for a while, football became secondary to more pressing concerns in the country, describing the events that had unfolded as a united Syrian effort to “get rid of terrorism and free the country”; he then casually claimed that after these efforts were successful, players that “had problems” (implying players who

were critical of the regime) “participated with us and everything was good”. When probed on what he meant by that last statement, the participant responded with “these players understood that we must unite and fight for the country on the pitch just like the army was struggling in the battlefield against terrorism”. Moreover, another participant belittled what he believed to be an insignificant minority that “wanted to make it [football] about politics”, stating: “When the team is playing and achieves good results, everyone flocks around it. The team is unifying, it brings and gathers people around it”. Another of the respondents, an assistant coach for the team during world cup matches, declared that the squad “had our peak performance during the crisis.” Adding that the team “took [on] the crisis and played for the nation.” One respondent who worked with the national team in 2016 framed success in terms of proximity to the president. “Our biggest reward was seeing the president after [the match with] Iran, when we qualified... and this was the biggest honor and biggest welcoming,” he said of his meeting with the president. The respondent presented that encounter and the president’s pleasure as the ultimate motivator for himself. “We met the president, thank God,” said another respondent who was also at the World Cup matches.

Such empathic responses claiming that football played a unifying role during the civil war that joined Syrians of all backgrounds together echoes the regime’s political narrative, as evidenced by its media mouthpieces. In particular, the regime exerted substantial effort in linking its most prized leader, Bashar al-Assad, with the narrative of unity and solidarity against terrorism. For instance, Al Watan, one of the very first private daily newspapers in Syria, adopted a pro-regime stance, which is apparent in the language and framing used by its contributors. In late 2017, it published an article which not only showcased Assad in a positive light, but also highlighted parts of a speech which he gave

in the presence of the Syrian national team's players where the president drew parallels between the Syrian armed forces' efforts in the war on one hand, and the efforts made by the team on the other: "... What matters most to me is the unprecedented level of performance that we were able to achieve in these tough times; usually, in countries afflicted by war, people are mostly concerned with diminishing the negative repercussions, and in the best of cases with conserving the socio-economic order. So, the fact that we have seen progress [in football performance] now is itself blatant accomplishment..." Assad continued: "We all known that all of our achievements amid current circumstances are based on the feats of our armed forces, and if it were not for their successes that we have been seeing and hearing about, we would not have achieved anything... I am sure that the national team was playing as valiantly as any Syrian citizen, and that [players] desired to complement and complete the work of the armed forces" (Karkoura, 2017, paras. 2-4).

However, this narrative stands in sharp contrast with the population's divisive stance on the Syrian national football team. In fact, independent coverage of Syrian reactions to their team's performance reveals a starkly different reality. In particular, wins by the team were celebrated primarily in the streets of Damascus, whereas they were greeted with silence in opposition-majority areas (Hall, 2017). Primary accounts from local journalists such as Aleppo's Anas Ammo corroborate this divisiveness, asserting that the narrative is enforced by the ruling party to create a sense of normalcy where there is none:

"All institutions in Syria are under the authority of the army and the Baath Party. Football in Syria is for Assad, not for Syria. Not just now, for 40 years" (Hall 2017, para. 24).

Assad has also committed violence against Syrian football players in order to assert his own authority, violence which dwarfs the actions of non-state actors against sports professionals. An investigation found that the regime, as of 2017, had killed 38 players from the top two divisions in addition to dozens from the lower rankings while another 13 players remain unaccounted for (Fainaru, 2017).

B. False Sense of Neutrality with a Nationalistic twist: Obfuscating Political Diversity

Also pervasive among most participant responses were the themes of harmony and political neutrality that stand in division among regime supporters and the opposition. One participant, a current player who had made substantial progress for his early days at a small local club, seemed genuinely persuaded that the team was generally separated from public officials. The politics were also separated from divisions like that. We were always loyal to our country and we wanted to show the best we can for our country“. However, which was actually counterbalanced by other feedback that betrayed his politically charged mindset: —But in the end, everyone came to realize that it was obvious who was behind the war and who behind the damaging actions against the country“ (in clear reference to the opposition). A player who had spent more than a decade playing for the national team was particularly vocal about political neutrality, reasserting it multiple times: the government does not interfere with the team. The important thing is that the team is the Syrian national team, for everyone. We do not bring politics into

sports as other countries did“; —we came government officials they jump on their [ad] a adamant on making hard claims about the nevertheless still cautious in their responses. For instance, midfielder who had played with the team in the 1980s and assumed an administrative role at stage mentioned that in the pre-conflict era, there was clear harmony among players, whereas —new blood“ today has engendered some tensions aspects to deal with, but it is natural that there is some contention in the future, hopefully, players will be mindful of this and will learn to act more rationally to avoid unnecessary conflict“. These themes were stubborn and information presented in the press. For instance, international coverage of developments pertaining to the Syrian national football team also shed light on the associated political dimension. In June of 2011 *The Times of Israel* published an article with the title: —Hundreds Attend Funeral of Who Became Rebel painting Syrian goalkeeper Abdussetar Sarout as a hero for choosing to fight the forces of Assad. The article outlines Sarout fierce activism against and opposition to the regime, highlighting Syrian activists and oppositionion and supporters have flooded Twitter with eulog of the revolution“ or ”songbird of the re para. 8). More importantly, investigations conducted by sports publications like ESPN the Magazine and independent NGOs such as the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR) suggest that the country’s general particularly in the early years of the conflict. For one, the SNHR’s investigation concluded that the Syrian regime had exploited players, events and facilities to advance

its oppressive practices: —From the beginning, we were essentially forced to march in support of Assad, sometimes carrying banners and wearing T-shirts with the president's image. "As such, artists were strongly supporting him because those are the people with the most influence in the street", Amr al-Najjar said. (Interview, 15 March 2015)

C. The Price of Loyalty: Subtle Coercion through Indirect Regime Endorsement

One of the more surprising findings of the interviews was total consensus among participants that the Syrian regime did not provide much support to the national football team in the form of financial capital during the civil war, as a means of compensation. While the regime did suffer tremendous losses and practically was dealing with more pressing matters, the surprising aspect was more insistence of participants on separating between the regime itself and the federation. The first respondent, a coach with many years of experience also playing for the national team, is the one that is responsible for the team's development and it has independence... complete independence... however, general agreement among participants that there were open lines of communication between the federation and the regime: —Of course, there is communication between the government and the head of the general union of sports; before, it was Mr. Mouawad Jomaa; currently, it is Mr. Firas Mualla, who corroborated this information, suggesting that the government does not engage in any sort of direct supervision of the team and its affairs. Instead, Firas Mualla, as the head of the sports federation, is the one responsible for the union [of sports]. (Interview, 15 March 2015)

family has a long history of monopolizing the sports industry. Firas Mualla, in particular, has occupied multiple high-ranking positions, even at an international level, by exploiting his public relations and connections with state connections go beyond Syria, he represented the Russian Federation in a competition after he joined the Russian Kuban Club in 2019 as an exception authorized by the head of the Syrian regime, al-Assad “ (—Mualla Family Monopolizes many references were made to funding coming from the private sector instead of the Syrian state. One participant stated: —But money, ‘g in favor of this kind of funding as a means of investing in local talent and national sporting heroes in the long term. Other responses on this topic were similar in nature: —In some clubs, there are financial there is no official political body that people. They support them by paying for their clothes and their rent and food, and by paying for moving them into the countryes “. capitalism suggests that these private donors may very well be directly or indirectly connected to the regime, thereby providing the authoritarian system with an opportunity to buy the loyalty of players through financial the purview of the federation and it has its expenses and revenues whether from the federation or investments or private backers said one of the respondents. —But does not interfere except through the general union There are few Syrian businessmen from the coast as connected and as wealthy as Samer Foz. He made his money at the peak of fighting during the civil war, cutting with anyone and everyone in the multipronged conflict. He sold wheat to ISIS and their

enemies, the Kurdish lead Syrian Democratic Forces, in addition to food products and other essential supplies in government-held areas. He is close to the regime's core security establishment, the Air Force Intelligence Directorate (Mehchy, 2021). He eventually rose up to invest in hotels and factories and became an international businessman with holdings across Syria, UAE, Lebanon and Turkey and a conduit for Assad's finances (Rasmussen & Osseiran, 2019). He was also named in the EU 2019 for materially supporting Assad's government's oppression (Talley & Rasmussen, 2019).

That same year he began investing in local football clubs as a way of clearing up his image in Syria. "Whales' of finance lured Syrians to football for their extravagant wealth amid a collapsing economy. Foz financed two rival teams, Hutteen Sporting Club and Tishreen Sporting Club. He first topped Hutteen by giving them large sums of money and buying the rights to advertise on their gear. He then financed Tishreen only after fears that Hutteen would be overtaken by White washes his name...in the Football Federation Stadium between the different football factions.

—This is how the war over Foz's money after capturing Samer Foz's money from the regime that allows the big Shabeeha and tyrants to subdue their club and players" (—Samer Foz White washes his name... para. 10).

The term Shabeeh is Arabic slang for thugs at the employ of the regime who are allowed to enrich themselves at the expense of the state and are beyond reproach because of their services to its masters. Such figures have penetrated to the very heart of the football establishment in Syria. This indecent highlight the desperate need for reform in Syria's national football league and

requirements and how it allows the Syrian regime another avenue to wield power. This presumption is supported by the feedback provided by other participants who stated that many players rely on the financial resources to improve their living standards. One respondent who played with the national team during the 1980s and 1990s welcomed the recent cash influx from wealthy businessmen because of the financial support from the businessmen which is helping raise the level of the local league which is giving a better national player, “the more competitive and professional Syrian football league, which in turn would translate into a better performing national squad. Foz took over financing of Tishreen after Fawaz al-Assad died. While Fawaz al-Assad acted behind the scenes throughout his engagement with the football club, the Tishreen football squad more clearly display his name on their yellow jersey (Assad and Samer Foz, 2020).

Benefactors such as Samer Foz inspire the same fear in the players, coaches and administrators as the regime does. When asked follow up questions about who specifically among Syria's financial super elite is the most feared, most respondents gave Foz a name and all of the respondents who were pressed on this issue answered in generalities. Aside from this kind of indirect endorsement that plays into the narrative, secondary research also suggests that the Syrian state has offered to grant amnesty to many players who had expressed regime views and fled the country out of fear of persecution. One example is Faisal Khatib, who decided to rejoin the team after having expressed significant hostility toward the Syrian regime. Some reports (Madu, 2017) obtained the primary account of Khatib on the matter, who claimed that his decision to return was partially motivated by his fear for his life after receiving multiple threats.

In addition to amnesty, returning players were given the opportunity to engage in potentially lucrative business ventures in partnership with connected Syrian football officials. Al-Khatib partnered with Fadi al-Dibbas to set up a company to import sports wear. D i b b a s i s d e s c r i b e d a s a s —D i f f a t Reaches the Throne of the Football Union, 2018, para.11) by opposition media. He was elected, by acclamation the President of the Syrian Football Association in 2018. Any would-be opponents were pressured not to run. Nader al-Atrash proclaimed that —the tyranny is less than the tyranny of the political dictators...p o —D i r e c t “a t (o f F a d i Reaches the Throne of the Football Union, 2018, para.4).

He resigned his post in 2019 after Syria lost a football match with Lebanon and after the team's disappointing performance (Debas Resigns from Syrian Football Union, 2019). After his resignation his assets were frozen, although it is unclear if the seizure is part of an anti-corruption crackdown or as punishment for his performance. (Nasser, 2019). Alongside another returning player Omar al-Somah, Dibbas also formed two other companies: Somah Contracting Company and the Omar al-Somah Sports Company.. (—D i f f a t o t “ R e Reaches the Throne of the Football Union, 2018).

D. F I F A ‘ s U n c l e t s H u m a n R i

Shortly after FIFA officials visited Syria for the first time in 2019, a human rights group in an open letter accused the organization of betraying the football players killed by the Assad regime. The group directly accuses the organization of being used f

benefit of the regime and of the instrumentalization of football for the purposes of power (The Syria Campaign, 2019).

Article 15, section C of FIFA's Statutes must comply with the principles of good governance, and shall in particular contain, at a minimum, provisions relating to the following matters: (a) to be neutral in matters of politics and religion; (b) to prohibit all forms of discrimination; (c) to be independent and avoid any form of political interference " (FIFA Statutes, 2019, para 3). It is clear that the Syrian regime is in breach of these provisions. A respondent believed that wealthy benefactors were stepping up their aid to local leagues at the direct order of Assad. Wealthy businessmen and war profiteers like Foz who were enriched by the war funneled these ill-gotten gains into the sport to support the regime, which is not permitted under the article's mentioned prohibition of political interference. In addition, the practice of the sport in Syria is not neutral in matters of politics, as only a single political narrative is promoted. As part of this narrative, as in the case of players like Firas Khaltib and Omar al-Somah, they are returned whether by coercion or temptation or a mixture of both.

FIFA also proclaims that it —is committed to the promotion and protection of recognized human rights and shall strive to ensure that its Statutes, 2019, para 3. Yet it is unclear how the organization is to uphold its stated obligations and commitments while simultaneously engaging with the Assad regime who had bombed and starved its people into submission. Its involvement instead may have given a dictator yet another mechanism with which to upgrade his authoritarian toolkit.

In May 2011, FIFA ruled that Syria as unsafe and that Damascus would not be able to host a scheduled upcoming match against Turkmenistan that has been scheduled for June because of the degradation of the security conditions there. Civil strife had been ongoing since May and so far, had killed more than 850 people (FIFA Rules Syria Unsafe for Olympic Qualifier, 2011).

In August of that year, Syria was disqualified from the 2014 World Cup and Tajikistan was instated in its place. The team was disqualified for fielding an unqualified player causing the governing body to impose a loss against Tajikistan during championship 's Asian qualifying round (Syria

Syria has had better results participating in Asian tournaments, specifically the AFC Champions League and the AFC Cup. In 2004 and 2010 Al-Jaish and Al-Itihad football clubs respectively won the AFC Cup. Matches between Syrian teams and their opponents made for exciting matches. The AFC Cup even promoted Kaif a mah ' s match against Jeonbuk, a Korean team, as one of the top five most exciting matches ever played in the championship. But since 2009, Syrian teams have been banned from the AFC ChampionsLeague and solely took part in the AFC Cup after having failed to meet the organization ' s criteria (Between sports and

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This chapter first synthesizes the key findings of the thesis and contextualizes them within the theoretical framework of authoritarian upgrading. It then discusses the theoretical implications of the findings, what limitations to the research were encountered, and recommendations for future research.

A. Literature Review

Chapter two reviewed a range of literature on the interaction between sports and politics across its many theatres, both on the local plane and on the international one. It also reviewed the political aspects of sports and its employment by the state before narrowing down to the interplay between politics in sports in the Arab world and then down to a discussion of the literature on the Syrian national football team itself.

B. Instrumentalization of the Syrian National Football Team for Authoritarian Upgrading

Relating the findings of the previous chapter back to the theoretical framework of authoritarian upgrading, some interesting observations can be made. On the dimension of political contestation, the regime's hijacking and subtle manipulation of the Syrian national football team has contributed to imbuing the football industry with a sense of normalcy that has a substantial effect not just on the Syrian society, but also on the international community. This is evidenced by FIFA's continuous cooperation with

the team, despite the fact that the Syrian regime does not seem to comply with the organization's own rules and regulations. Moreover, the regime's decades-old corrupt crony capitalist system and associated clientelistic networks, a result of its capturing of selective economic reforms, were used to wrest control of the Syrian national team's allegiances partially through the power of financial capital. Third, the team's successes on the international scene, against all odds, have endowed the Syrian regime with the opportunity to appropriate the team's prestige in such a way to enhance its international linkages despite growing pressure both locally and internationally and project an air of normalcy on the international stage.

C. Research Limitations

One of the limitations of this research is the low number of participants involved in the study and the inaccessibility of FIFA officials. While the use of snowball sampling helped to recruit respondents in a timely manner, nevertheless substantial resistance was encountered in the process of recruitment overall, as many potential candidates either did not respond at all to the researcher's request to join the study, or were rejected altogether despite being promised full anonymity. This also raises the question of bias, seeing as the majority of participants either had pro-regime opinions or were reluctant to say anything that might be interpreted as being anti-regime, for fear of being caught and reprimanded. However, this bias, no matter how strong, only reinforces the finding that the team has been politicized by the Syrian leadership. It would explain the contrast between participant responses on the constructs of unity and political neutrality on one hand, and the findings of secondary sources on the other, which paint a starkly different reality. Moreover, while the telephone interviews

allowed the researcher to interpret responses to the best of his abilities, generally meeting with interviewees in a physical space on a one-to-one basis would have better equipped the researcher to observe facial expressions and body language patterns, which would have yielded a slightly more accurately interpretation of the data.

D. Recommendations for Future Research

One of the main findings of this thesis was the importance of the connection between local and international instrumentalization of the Syrian national football team for the creation of a political narrative favoring the regime that is also at least partially adopted by international institutions, thereby legitimizing the regime and contributing to its authoritarian resilience. However, the focus of the study was on local parties, mainly figures affiliated with the team itself, most of whom exhibited pro-regime tendencies or at least adopted its narrative. Future research endeavors would do well to probe foreign actors such as FIFA on their handling of other similar sensitive situations where well-performing national football teams are being instrumentalized by authoritarian regimes for their own narrow benefits. Such studies would thus play a complementary role, helping to paint a more comprehensive picture of how authoritarianism can thrive even in the midst of unfavorable local circumstances.

APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

How long have you been involved with the Syrian national football team? Please state your role, duties related to your position, and how long you have occupied this role.

How would you compare the team's performance before and during the infamous civil war? What were the main challenges that stood in the way of the team in times of conflict, especially when competing at the international stage?

How would you describe the relationship of the Syrian government with the national football team? Do government agencies offer the team any special privileges/resources? Do key government / leadership figures visit the team to offer moral support? Would you say the team is well-funded and taken care of? If so, is this support unconditional, or does the team have certain responsibilities toward the government that it is obligated to fulfill?

Does the Syrian government itself appoint key administrative figures to oversee the national football team's operations, vision and objectives? Does the government have a monopoly over how the team is run, or are there independent bodies that manage it?

Do you believe that the national football team is politically neutral, or has it been politicized? If so, who would you say is responsible for imbuing this sport with politics: Syrian leadership, opposition groups, or both? Are there any local/regional/international incentives behind this politicization?

Since the start of the civil war, have there been any conflicts inside the team pertaining to politics? Do team members have diverging political stances? If so, how has this affected team harmony/solidarity? Have some players quit or had fights with other players/managers?

Have any team members been coerced/threatened to adopt a certain political stance to preserve their spot on the team?

How is the team's relationship with regular Syrian citizens? Do citizens unite behind it and support it unconditionally? Or is it controversial? Please elaborate.

APPENDIX II

INTERVIEW DATES

- Former captain 29/11/2020
- Player turned assistant coach 25/11/2020
- Former player 26/11/2020
- Player. 27/11/2020
- Player. 29/11/2020
- Player then worked as an administrative assistant 20/11/2020
- Player turned assistant coach. 25/11/2020
- Player turned coach. 28/11/2020
- Former player. 29/11/2020
- Current player. 4/12/2020
- Former player 23/11/2020
- Former player 7/12/2020

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