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Why Islamists Love the World Cup

Jihadists are some of the most ardent fans of the world's most popular sport.

by [David A. Graham \(/authors/david-a-graham.html\)](/authors/david-a-graham.html) July 06, 2010



Anwar Amro / AFP-Getty Images

Abbas Atwi (right) of Lebanon's Al-Ahed soccer team, which has the backing of Hizbullah.

In early June, several [heavily armed Islamists \(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/14/somali-soccer-fans-execut_n_611576.html\)](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/06/14/somali-soccer-fans-execut_n_611576.html), part of a group that admires Osama bin Laden and wants to bring his ideals to Somalia, surprised a group of soccer fans gathered in Mogadishu to watch a World Cup match. They killed two of the fans, and told the rest to go home, saying the sport was ungodly.

But if the Al Qaeda leader heard about the attack from his hiding place in Pakistan, he most certainly disapproved. Bin Laden—whose strict Islamist worldview proscribes music, women's education, gambling, drinking, homosexuality, and the shaving of beards—is a fan of the game, and his [preferred position is center forward \(http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/afghanistan/article7100865.ece#cid=OTC-RSS&attr=797093\)](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/afghanistan/article7100865.ece#cid=OTC-RSS&attr=797093). He is one of the many jihadists who worship the world's most popular sport. "It's on the whole their favorite thing after jihad," says Scott Atran, an American and French anthropologist who has studied the interplay between terror groups and soccer.



(<http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/06/11/world-cup-faces.html>)

World Cup Faces. View photo gallery

[World Cup Faces: Germany vs. Argentina \(/photo/2010/06/11/world-cup-faces.html\)](/photo/2010/06/11/world-cup-faces.html)

Several leading Islamist groups have ties to the soccer world. As a younger man, Hamas leader and Gaza Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh was a member of Gaza's [Al-Shate soccer team](http://articles.latimes.com/2010/apr/29/world/la-fg-gaza-soccer-20100430/2) (<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/apr/29/world/la-fg-gaza-soccer-20100430/2>). Hamas's allies in Lebanon, Hizbullah, are also fanatics about more than Islam: when Beirut's Al-Ahed won the Lebanese Premier League in 2008, it did so with the sponsorship of Al-Manar, the official television organ of Hizbullah.

For many extremists, however, it's not just about the love of the game or even [Muhammad's injunction to believers](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503545336&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaEAskTheScholar) (http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?cid=1119503545336&pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaEAskTheScholar) that they maintain sound bodies through exercise. In fact, soccer has a proven history as a tool of jihad—it's a useful method of bringing recruits into the fold and helping to encourage camaraderie among those who have already joined.

A story that [bin Laden is a fan of British squad Arsenal](http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,421326,00.html) (<http://www.spiegel.de/international/0,1518,421326,00.html>) sounds too good to be true. (And it almost certainly is, though that hasn't stopped the team's fans from adopting him as one of their own with [a tongue-in-cheek chant](http://www.xomba.com/true_story_how_osama_bin_laden_became_arsenal_soccer_fan) (http://www.xomba.com/true_story_how_osama_bin_laden_became_arsenal_soccer_fan)). But soccer was one of his earliest strategies for organizing followers and spreading his religious message. "When he was a kid, he organized soccer games and always brought lunch, even on the days he was fasting," says [Lawrence Wright](http://www.newsweek.com/video/2006/12/13/audiobook-the-looming-tower.html) (<http://www.newsweek.com/video/2006/12/13/audiobook-the-looming-tower.html>), a *New Yorker* staff writer whose book [The Looming Tower](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/037541486X/?tag=nwswk-20) (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/037541486X/?tag=nwswk-20>) is the definitive account of Al Qaeda's origins. "They would go and play in poor areas of Jiddah [Saudi Arabia]. He always had a social consciousness about it." The young bin Laden was already mindful of religious strictures—in the name of modesty, he kept his turban on to play, and wore long pants, a decision other players gradually mimicked (the insistence on covering the legs prefigured [strict rules imposed on soccer players' attire](http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/06/26/banned-life-after-the-taliban-in-afghanistan.slide4.html) (<http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/06/26/banned-life-after-the-taliban-in-afghanistan.slide4.html>) by his allies in the Taliban). He used the occasions to instill religious lessons, too, offering additional treats for participants who could answer trivia questions on the Quran and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad during breaks in the action.

The power of soccer as an organizing force stayed with him as he traveled. When Al Qaeda was headquartered in Sudan in the 1990s, the terrorist group had its own two-team league, Wright says. It wasn't pickup ball: this was serious soccer, with regularly scheduled practices and weekly matches between the squads after Friday prayers. Just before 9/11, according to *The Looming Tower*, one rank-and-file member of Al Qaeda who knew nothing of the impending attack had a dream in which a team of fellow jihadists—all of whom were curiously pilots—squared off against the Americans in a soccer match.



(<http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/06/26/banned-life->

[after-the-taliban-in-afghanistan.html](http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/06/26/banned-life-after-the-taliban-in-afghanistan.html))

James Reeve

After the Taliban, Back to Normal. View the photo gallery.

[Photos: What the Taliban Banned \(/photo/2010/06/26/banned-life-after-the-taliban-in-afghanistan.html\)](http://www.newsweek.com/photo/2010/06/26/banned-life-after-the-taliban-in-afghanistan.html)

But the true cradle for jihadist football was Afghanistan and Pakistan, where fervent Islamists traveled to fight the Russian invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, according to locals. One byproduct was a de facto mini-World Cup between mujahedin, with fighters forming teams to represent their countries of origin.

For those fighters, soccer was a useful and even necessary way to break up the boredom of training and waiting to engage the enemy, because actual skirmishes were few and far between, Atran says. After the Russians left and jihadists returned home, soccer matches provided a forum to meet and keep in touch, particularly for the Indonesian mujahedin who formed the core of the terrorist group Jemaah Islamiah, he adds.

More often, however, soccer leads to militancy rather than vice versa: "Our data show that a reliable predictor of whether or not someone joins the jihad is being a member of an action-oriented group of friends. It's surprising how many soccer buddies join together," Atran [told the Senate Armed Services Committee in March \(http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2010/03%20March/Atran%2003-10-10.pdf\)](http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2010/03%20March/Atran%2003-10-10.pdf) .

For example, most of the participants in the March 2003 Madrid bombings played soccer together. And in his forthcoming book *Talking to the Enemy: Faith, Brotherhood and the (Un)Making of Terrorists*, Atran looks at the strange case of 10 Hamas suicide bombers from the West Bank town of Hebron over a period of several years. The young men, he writes, "reflect the strata of Hebron society: some were simple workers; some were from the middle class; some were well-established and educated." What tied them together was that they had all played together on a

soccer team organized by a local mosque. Israeli officials believe that when Hamas's military commanders needed recruits for operations, they looked to the squad, which was already a tight-knit group with clear religious ties—making it a sort of farm team for violent operations.

Of course, that doesn't mean that every Islamist is on board with the transformative religious power of soccer. As with many theological Islamic questions, viewpoints run the gamut. In addition to the Taliban's strict limitations on the game, other critics—like [this very curmudgeonly mullah](http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/2503.htm) (<http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/2503.htm>)—say it has become a distraction from religious observance for young Muslims. A second line of thought goes that international competitions like the World Cup lend credence to national borders—which pan-Islamists say are artificial barriers devised to divide the mass of Muslims, who are truly a single people. And Iraqi police [said in May](http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/World-Cup-Terror-Plot-Al-Qaeda-Operative-Suspected-Of-Planning-Attack-In-South-Africa-Detained/Article/201005315634059) (<http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/World-Cup-Terror-Plot-Al-Qaeda-Operative-Suspected-Of-Planning-Attack-In-South-Africa-Detained/Article/201005315634059>) that they disrupted an Al Qaeda plot to attack the World Cup—perhaps more a question of opportunity to make an impact than objection to the game.

On the other hand, many clerics say there's no objection to playing or watching professional soccer matches. On its "Ask a Scholar" page, IslamOnline [features jurisprudential analyses](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1148980352168) (http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?pagename=IslamOnline-English-Ask_Scholar/FatwaE/FatwaE&cid=1148980352168) in favor of the sport. That's a high-powered endorsement: IslamOnline was founded by Yusuf al-Qaradawi, a hardline preacher who, though not a member of any terrorist group, has issued opinions on suicide bombings and is widely respected among Muslim fundamentalists worldwide.

If the pro-soccer factions hoped the 2010 World Cup would give the jihad a boost, the tournament has surely been a disappointment: only two predominantly Muslim countries, Nigeria and Algeria, qualified for the cup, and both have been eliminated.

With Sami Yousafzai.

Correction (July 6, 2010): *This article originally said that Somali soccer fans were accosted watching a World Cup match between Mexico and Iran. The Islamic Republic did not qualify for the tournament. Newsweek regrets the error.*