

The White Seagulls Fly High in Baghdad

by [Ahmed Ali \(/experts/ahmed-ali\)](/experts/ahmed-ali)

Aug 16, 2011

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ahmed Ali \(/experts/ahmed-ali\)](/experts/ahmed-ali)

Ahmed Ali is a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy.



Articles & Testimony

On a day that saw both spectacular terrorist attacks and an annual football championship game, comparing Iraq's soccer world and its broader political system can be enlightening.

If you were watching Iraq's government-sponsored satellite channel Al-Iraqiyah Sports yesterday between 9 p.m. and 12 a.m. Baghdad time, you would not have known that the whole country had just endured its bloodiest day in over a year. Earlier in the day, spectacular attacks killed and injured over 300 people. But as soon as Ramadan's daily fast was broken, over 50,000 spectators packed into Baghdad's most prominent stadium, Al-Sha'ab, to watch the Baghdad-based Al-Zawraa club (dubbed the White Seagulls because of their white jerseys) take on the Arbil-based Arbil Club (known as the yellow Citadel given the colors of their jerseys and the presence of the historical citadel in downtown Arbil) in the championship game of a long soccer season.

The most obvious conclusion one might come to at the end of the evening is that Iraqis are resilient and attacks are not going to deter them from carrying on with their daily lives. That is apparent in the actions of the soccer federation that did not cancel the game despite the attraction it could provide to insurgents as a target and the fans who were, ironically, bothered by the heavy security presence at the stadium. However, in a more subtle manner, it was evident how the game mirrored the country's political and social situation -- divided, hotly contested, and with deeply unclear significance.

Comparing the Iraqi soccer world and the broader political system can be enlightening. For more than 10 months, the soccer world in Iraq was consumed in a heated dispute that at times turned ethno-sectarian over who should head the Iraqi soccer federation. The incumbent, like many candidates for the March 2010 parliamentary elections, came under the scrutiny of the controversial de-Ba'athification process, which allows candidates for high level positions to be disqualified due to allegations that they were members of the banned Ba'ath Party. Throughout that time, Iraq's national soccer team was under threat of being banned from international competition by FIFA, the world soccer governing body. Iraqi soccer did not have a government -- just as it took Iraq's current government

almost ten months to be seated.

The soccer federation is ahead of the Iraqi government in one respect, in that it has filled all of its positions while the government has still failed to fill important positions such as those of the defense and interior ministries. However, just as Iraqi politics is often criticized, internally and externally, for not having developed capable and mature institutions, Iraq's athletes are frequently critical of the lack of proper support ranging from players' salaries and equipment to the absence of functioning facilities. And then, of course, there is the judiciary. Iraqi political parties consistently (and rightly) single out the judiciary for its lack of independence and criticize its performance and lack of capacity. In the last ten months, criticizing soccer referees after every game became a predictable complaint (something not unique to Iraq, of course).

After all the political gamesmanship, therefore, it was a relief to finally see the teams take the field for the championship. But even there, political overtones intruded. The game illustrated the difference between teams based in Baghdad and teams based in Iraqi Kurdistan. Up until 2003, Al-Zawraa and other teams in Baghdad like Al-Talaba, the Police club, and the Air Force club used to be the incubators of national team players. Consequently, these clubs attracted the best talent. For aspiring players, the proverbial wisdom was -- "if you want to play for the national team, you go to Baghdad and play for one of these four teams." The Baghdad-based clubs used to play at sold-out games wherever they went. Moreover, since the league's inception in 1973 until 2006, only two non-Baghdad teams have won the championship trophy, in 1978 and 1983. It has always appeared as if it was not just the government of Iraq that was too overtly centrally and Baghdad-focused, but Iraqi sports as well.

Starting in 2007, a dramatic change began to take shape. Enjoying the region's economic prosperity and stability, clubs in Iraqi Kurdistan began to attract the best national players. They were drawn to go north because of an improved security situation and higher pay offered by well-funded and well-supported clubs. As a result, Arbil won three consecutive championships and its northern rival, Dahuk, won it all last year. A look at the starting eleven for the championship game tells it all. Al-Zawraa fielded mostly young players while Arbil fielded 10 experienced players from outside Iraqi Kurdistan. Only the goalie was a local Arbili.

Of course, that did not make a difference for the White Seagulls. After playing for 120 minutes, they were able to beat Arbil by penalty kicks. This was an agonizingly dramatic way to win a game, but to millions of supporters the win was gratifying. The five year championship drought ended with a 12th championship, making Al-Zawraa the winningest club in Iraq's soccer history. Iraq's victory over Saudi Arabia in 2007 in the Asian Championship was broadly seen as a national unifier at a time when the U.S. troop surge was in its initial phase. It remains to be seen if Al-Zawraa's win yesterday means the return of Baghdad's political dominance as U.S. forces prepare to withdraw by the end of this year.

Ahmed Ali is a Marcia Robbins-Wilf research associate at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Iraq. ❖

ForeignPolicy.com

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)

