

Sports, Politics, and Social Change in the Modern Middle East

Prologue: setting: a high school classroom somewhere in the United States

Characters:

Mrs. Daily: a teacher

Mark: a high school student

Amy: a high school student

Luis: a high school student

Mrs. Daily: I just wanted to check on how your group is coming along in choosing a topic for the final project for this class. You know, you really have to choose a topic and start your research. The clock's ticking.

Mark: We've been thinking about it, but we still haven't come up with a topic that we really want to do. We considered the end of World War II or something about the Russian Revolution, but neither topic really grabbed us.

Amy: It *is* rather overwhelming, Mrs. D. I mean, any significant event, any time in history, any place in the world? There are a lot of choices, so that makes it hard. But it's also kinda hard to come up with something that we want to research for the next three months.

Mrs. Daily: You're right. The important thing is to pick something that really interests you, something that you care deeply about. Then you have to show us *why* you care, why the topic is important, what it shows about developments in world history. So what is it that you really feel strongly about?

Luis: Sports! That's how I spend my free time: fall on the football team, winter on the soccer team! Shooting baskets and working out in the gym on my own.

Amy: Yeah, I play basketball and run track. So I'm with Luis! What a great idea to study the impact of sports on history!

Mrs. Daily: (doubtful but trying to be tactful) Wait a minute. Sports? You'd be better off sticking with the Russian Revolution. Sports aren't really a topic of serious historical inquiry. I'm not saying that sports aren't *important*. It's a very good thing to be physically active, and sports are a significant part of popular culture. Also, I know that you learn teamwork and make positive friends. I'm not saying sports aren't good or anything like that. But playing soccer or basketball is recreational, not something earth-shaking. It's not something that changes society – or something that you can show as significant in world affairs.

Mark: (disappointed) But you said something that really interests us, and we are interested in sports.

Mrs. Daily: I have to go talk with some other groups now, but why don't you keep thinking. I'm sure you can come up with something. (She smiles and walks off.)

Amy: Too bad. I could actually be excited about researching sports. (Sighs) I can see her point, though. I guess it's only entertainment, not really something important.

Luis: (*suddenly*) What if she's wrong?

Mark: Who? What do you mean?

Luis: Mrs. Daily. Maybe she's wrong. I was reading about soccer, and did you know that a whole war started over it? I mean there was a war between Honduras and El Salvador that started over a soccer game – it was even called “The Soccer War.” And I read in a book called *How Soccer Explains the World* about Bosnian soccer clubs how some of them developed into paramilitary groups during the 1990s war in that country. I think that we should look around and see what kind of information we can find about sports in modern history. Let's just see if we can come up with a great topic that we really enjoy researching!

Mark: I'm in!

Amy: But what if Mrs. Daily doesn't like it? This project is half of our grade for this quarter!

Luis: We'll do such a good job that she HAS to like it! (*He looks at Amy's face, which is still doubtful.*) Let's just see what we can come up with. I bet we can surprise Mrs. Daily. OK?

Mark and Amy: OK.

Luis, Amy, Mark's Project: A Performance in 3 Acts on “Sports in Modern Middle Eastern History”

Act 1: Sports and National Politics

Scene 1: Sports and political protest in Iran

Characters:

Mitra (female): an Iranian-American high school student

Tyler: an American student

Jenna: an American student

Setting: high school computer lab in Tucson, Arizona, fall 2009

Mitra: Hey, everyone. Look at this great YouTube video that I just found! We should include part of this in our presentation on political protest in Iran.

Tyler: What are you talking about, Mitra? That's a video of a soccer game. It has nothing to do with political protest.

Mitra: Look again at what some of the players are wearing. Look at their wrist bands.

Jenna: I see the green wristbands, but....

Tyler: Are you saying that they are wearing them in support of Mir Hossein Mousavi, the "green" candidate, who lost the Iranian election in June?

Mitra: You mean, the man who actually WON that election! Many Iranians believe that the election was 'stolen' by the current president Ahmadinejad and his cronies who don't want change in Iran! Look at how many people were demonstrating in the streets of Iran. And they were wearing green and sporting green flags; that's why they call it the Green Revolution.

Jenna: OK, I get your point. I just don't see why it's so interesting that these soccer players are wearing green armbands.

Mitra: It wasn't just a small sporting event; it was a World Cup qualifying game in Seoul, South Korea, that was televised all over the world. The six players who wore them embarrassed the Iranian government – though at first, government officials tried to pretend that the green armbands were some Shi'a Muslim religious tribute, sort of like a Christian wearing a cross to ask God for victory. It was a good try! But everyone in Iran saw through *that* explanation! A green armband means something very particular – and very political - today.

Tyler: Won't the players get in trouble for that?

Mitra: They already have. At least four of them have been forcibly "retired" from the sport. They can never play again.

Jenna: Ouch. That must hurt. It must have taken courage to do something like that.

Mitra: Yes. The international sports community has already been complaining that the government of Iran is overly involved in soccer.

Jenna: Isn't that ironic? I read – maybe YOU made me read, Mitra – how Iranian nationalists 100 years ago considered soccer too Western since it was introduced by the British imperialists; now they consider soccer to be an important part of Iranian culture.

Mitra: Also, sports play a role in international relations. Do you know that the U.S. and Iran haven't had diplomatic relations since the Iranian Revolution in 1979? That means

that our officials don't work directly with each other – and that Americans can't go to Iran freely, and it's hard for Iranians to come here. Our countries have often been on the brink of war with each other, most recently about Iran's nuclear program. So it was a really big deal in 1998 when the Iranian and the U.S. soccer teams played each other at the World Cup: the first time in 20 years that they had met in an international competition. The Iranian team members gave white flowers to the U.S. team members as a sign of peace.

Tyler: It seems that sports can be important in international relations. No wonder the Iranian government was upset about their athletes wearing green armbands at last week's game in South Korea. Because of international sports – and the fact that games are broadcasted on television and computers, the players' act of political protest could be seen around the world!

Scene 2: Morocco: Sports and foreign policy

Characters:

Fuzia (female): mother of Hosni and Mohammad

Hosni (male): a Moroccan high school student

Mohammad (male): his older brother

Setting: an apartment in Rabat, Morocco, Dec. 1979.

Fuzia: I am not sure that I like the idea of you boys going to the soccer game today. You know how those games get out of hand.

Hosni: Oh, mom. You worry too much. We wouldn't miss this game for the world! People have been talking about it for months: the big game between our Moroccan national team and our big rival, Algeria. I saved up my money for months to buy this giant Moroccan flag that I'm taking with me.

Fuzia: Well, be careful. You know that those games are almost like a war.

Mohammad: Actually, I would never say this outside the house (*Mohammad lowers his voice*), but in a way, it IS a war. I mean, King Hassan himself takes a real interest in the game and even gives directions to the coach before big games like the one against Algeria. Some people say that he often tells the coach which players to put on the field and what kind of tactics to use. Our country's honor is at stake, just as it is when we fight with bullets instead of with a black and white ball.

Hosni: Of course, our king completely understands the importance of soccer: how it unites our people in a glorious struggle against Algeria. I can't wait to get out in the stands to scream, "Western Sahara is Morocco's," so that all those Algerians hear us.

Fuzia: What if they get mad, and a fight breaks out?

Hosni: Then I will kick some Algerian butts!

Mohammad: (*glaring at his brother*) No, he won't mom. I'll keep him out of trouble. Now come on, Hosni. Don't you think sometimes that our government uses soccer games to make us think about our rivalry with Algeria instead of about our country's real political and economic problems? I mean, the government wants to keep us from demanding reforms inside our country by focusing our opposition on *another* country.

Fuzia: (*looking shocked*) You could get in big trouble for saying something like that!

Mohammad: No. Everyone knows that I love my country and my leader. Besides, I know that you would never twist my words around and report me.

Fuzia: Still.....

Mohammad: Everyone knows that the government is involved in soccer. The police and the military control many soccer teams and soccer clubs. It gives them a chance to boss people around.

Fuzia: Mohammad!!

Mohammad: Sorry, Mom.

Hosni: What do you mean about the military?

Mohammad: Well, lots of military leaders and high-ranking police officers run soccer teams. When I was your age, the police even fixed a game since the police chief who ran the team wanted it to win so that it could move up into the First Division. But the newspapers raised such an outcry about the obvious interference that the government had to demote the team to the Third Division and fire all the referees.

Fuzia: Are you SURE you should be talking like this?

Mohammad: Oh, it's all right. I just wanted Hosni to know so that he doesn't get manipulated – by our government or especially by the crowd – into doing something crazy tonight. We don't want another soccer war like the one in Central America a few years ago!

Hosni: OK, OK, I'll behave. But I WILL yell "Go, Morocco" until I lose my voice – or the Algerians slink home in defeat!

Act 2: Scoring Points in the Eyes of the World: The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict and International Sports

Scene 1: Israeli athletes: representing their country abroad

Characters:

Hadasa (female): a high school student

Anat (female): Hadasa's mother

Yinan (male): Hadasa's father

Setting: an apartment in Tel Aviv, Israel, 2011.

Hadasa: Hey, mom and dad. Did you see this article in the newspaper that basketball legend Tal Brody was appointed to be Israel's first international goodwill ambassador? (*Teasingly*) You always say that I need to study hard – which I DO by the way – rather than spending so much time on sports because sports won't get me anywhere. But look at how he has succeeded – off the basketball court as well as on. Notice that an athlete was chosen to represent our country and our people!

Anat: Well, there are exceptions to everything.

Yinan: Tal Brody! I remember him playing for Tel Aviv's Maccabi team when I was your age, Hadasa. He chose to play for us instead of joining the NBA in the U.S. He did so much for Israeli basketball! In fact, I wasn't much older than you when he led the team to Israel's first European title. It must have been 1977. Yes, I was in college....

Hadasa: He really is doing an important thing today too: countering anti-Semitism and negative views of Israel.

Yinan: That IS important! I can understand why an athlete would have a special understanding of that. Tal was a young man during the Munich Olympics in 1972 when eight Palestinian terrorists broke into the place where the Israeli Olympic team was staying, killing two of them who resisted and taking nine others hostage. In the end, the nine hostages – and five terrorists – were also killed in a botched effort to free them.

Anat: It was a terrible time for all of us when we heard the news. I'll never forget that – the horror of more Jews being murdered in Germany, and then the Olympics continuing as if nothing had happened! Of course, Operation Wrath of God was payback – though I think people either admire us or hate us for the way we took down Palestinian terrorists, one by one, through assassination.

Hadasa: Maybe the methods were brutal, but we have to protect ourselves from being victimized. Our athletes continue to worry when they compete abroad. Luckily, there hasn't been another tragedy like Munich, but our sports teams still encounter anti-Semitism.

Yinan: So more power to Tal Brody!

Hadasa: Yes, I'm glad that people recognize that sports can be a force for peace.

Scene 2: Palestinian athletes defending their nationhood

Characters:

Sammer (male)

Maha (female)

Ehab (male)

Setting: a soccer practice field in the Palestinian territories. Two teenage soccer players, Sammer and Ehab, are walking home with their friend Maha after a practice.

Sammer: It really bothers me that we are at war and that Israeli authorities use sports as a weapon against us! I mean, our team just had such a great practice. I think that we are becoming really good if I do say so myself. And I DO! We are ready to win some games – if only we could play them. But Israeli restrictions on our movements will make it hard to go anywhere or have anyone come here to play a game.

Maha: That's true. It's so hard. Not just for local teams, but for our national one. My parents were saying that Palestinians weren't even allowed to HAVE a team in international FIFA competitions until 1998 even though we had been regularly playing soccer from the 1920s. It was as if the world thought that our people had stopped existing after Israel was created in 1948! As if we had lost our identity when we lost our country!

Sammer: Some Israelis don't want the world to know that we still exist as a nation. I guess they see it as a threat to them – though I don't know why. We – the Jews and us – can both exist. In fact, we both HAVE existed for thousands of years – and we didn't really begin fighting until the last century or so.

Ehab: Also, it's not like the Israelis want us Palestinians to play on their teams either. Players who do that are often taunted and even called racist names by Israeli fans.

Maha: And I'm sure that our own Palestinian people are not very happy when our people play for Israeli teams either. So we need our own team – and we deserve to have our people represented at international competitions!

Ehab: That's right! But it's hard to do. Today, theoretically, we are allowed to have a Palestinian team in international competitions, but the Israelis usually refuse our people exit visas to participate. It was terrible when we had to forfeit the final match in the qualification round for the 2007 Asian Football Confederation playoffs because the Israeli authorities denied exit visas to every single member of the Palestinian team. Luckily, that game didn't really count in the long run. But what a horrible blow it was when we might have qualified for the 2010 World Cup, but we had to forfeit the game against Singapore because the Israelis again denied exit visas to our players from Gaza and the West Bank! If we had played a game and lost, it would have been one thing – but to be denied the right to play at all! That really hurts.

Sammer: The crazy thing is that the only way we can put together a 'Palestinian' team is by using Palestinian-American players from South America or even the U.S., people have

never even been here. Using players of Palestinian descent from other countries has one advantage: those players, at least, can get visas and show up on the field. However, it's totally strange to have a Palestinian team in which some of the players don't speak Arabic, only Spanish or English. Instead of being a unified national team, it's like the Tower of Babel that we read about in the scriptures.

Ehab: Talk about scriptures: I wish the world would realize how much we all have in common: Palestinian Christians, Palestinian Muslims, Israeli Jews. We all believe in the same God.

Maha: Even more than that, I wish that people would realize that most people in the world want the exact same things: a good life, security for ourselves and the people we love, hope for the future.

Sammer: And, of course, to have some fun playing and watching sports!

Act 3: Women's Rights or Religious Freedom?

Scene 1: Women and Soccer in Iran

Characters:

Fariba (female): Iranian soccer fan

Maryam (female): her aunt

Behzad (male): her brother

Tahereh (female): her mother

Setting: Tehran, Iran, in a private apartment, 2009.

Fariba: I wish the Islamic Republic of Iran would find something better to do besides making trouble over soccer!

Maryam: Fariba, my dear niece, you shouldn't talk that way about your own country.

Fariba: I can say whatever I want in my own home, and that's the way I feel. I'm tired of being ruled by religious fundamentalists, who don't like women doing anything and try to make us be like Arabs when we AREN'T Arabs!

Maryam: It's our Shi'a Muslim traditions, not Arab culture.

Fariba: Whatever! It's not like the Iran in which you and Mom grew up.

Maryam: Now Fariba, we have a lot of freedom. Women in Iran drive; we work outside the home; we attend college at a much higher rate than men. Those rights are more important than sports.

Fariba: Yes, but sports participation is a symbol of what we can't do: the restrictions on our interactions with men, on our participation in public events, on the way we dress.

Behzad: What are you going on about? And why are you so upset about this right now?

Fariba: Didn't you hear? An Iranian soccer club just suspended three officials and had to pay a fine of \$5,000 just because there was a friendly game between an Iranian men's team and an Iranian women's team. That is apparently "un-Islamic."

Maryam: You must admit that it seems rather inappropriate – men and women that aren't related having so much physical contact!

Fariba: Oh, please! It was just a game. I don't know what idiot recorded the game on his cell phone video-camera and reported it to the authorities. Women never get to do anything. We can't even GO to soccer games. Yes, I'm still angry that the government went back on its promise a few years ago that we could attend professional soccer games. Hey, Iran was playing in the World Cup, and half our country couldn't even see it!

Tahereh: I know. That was unfair. Before the revolution of 1979, things were so different. When I was your age, I would attend soccer games with your father.... The "new" policies seem backwards to me too. I agree with you, Fariba, that the situation about women attending the game was badly handled. First, President Ahmadinejad came out with an announcement that women could attend the games as long as they sat in special seating areas for women. That was a great compromise, but then the religious leadership overturned it.

Fariba: You see, Behzad. It IS unfair for women. I wish we could go back to the way things were when you were young, Mom.

Tahereh: Maybe in some ways, life was better then. But not politically. There was no freedom for anyone – women or men – under the shah.

Fariba: Well, I'm not taking about politics, just about soccer – and about women. It's much easier for boys in this country.

Behzad: Wait a minute. Don't forget that the religious rules make it hard for us too. For example, it's really hard to fast during the holy month of Ramadan when you are training for soccer. Not eating during the daylight hours isn't impossible – even though the physical exercise makes me extra hungry. But not being able to drink anything at all! THAT is truly terrible. It's so easy to get dehydrated when you're playing hard and can't drink even a sip of water.

Fariba: But you can still find a way to play soccer and keep hydrated: You just practice at night, after the sun goes down, when you can drink as much water or sports drinks as you want. What I'm saying is that, you guys can adapt to religious rules and still play sports, but it's harder for us women.

Tahereh: I see what she means. Behzad, you are complaining about not being able to drink anything during the day during Ramadan; however, you should try to do that while also playing in a woman's jersey with long sleeves and a head scarf. You get so much hotter because of the clothes that you need more water. (*She shakes her head.*)

Fariba: Speaking of the dress code reminds me how the West also makes sports participation harder for women. Take the ongoing controversy over Islamic women's sports uniforms: whether Muslim women should even be allowed on the field if we cover our hair or wear long sleeves. Often our teams are caught in the middle: our government doesn't let us play unless we wear those uniforms; the West doesn't want to let us play if we DO wear them. It's a no-win situation.

Tahereh: I guess the ideal would be for women to be able to make that choice for themselves – how to dress, how to conduct themselves, whether or not to sit in the soccer stadiums with men.

Fariba: Exactly! I don't think that it's fair that my government or the international community both try to make the decision for me. All I want is the right to choose.

Scene 2: International sports and criticism of the status of Saudi Arabian women

Characters:

Jean (male): an aide at the International Olympics Committee headquarters

Valerie (female): Jean's girlfriend, who works with him at the IOC office

Aneesa (female): an Iraqi friend of Jean and Valerie, who is studying in Switzerland

Setting: Lausanne, Switzerland, in a café not far from the International Olympics Committee, 2012

Jean: The International Olympic Committee is really facing some difficult issues lately. Sometimes I'm glad that I'm just a lowly worker, not someone with a position of power or responsibility since I don't know how I'd decide some of them! Take, for example, the question of Muslim women in international sports. Have you seen the Human Rights Watch report from February? It documents how the government of Saudi Arabia discriminates against women in sports. So the committee is unsure whether to ban Saudi Arabia – and countries like that – from participating in international sports.

Valerie: What's so controversial? I can see why the IOC might want to ban Saudi Arabia. The committee has put sanctions on a country before because of its internal policies. Consider how South Africa was banned from the Olympics, international soccer, all sporting events for almost 30 years because of the racist system of apartheid. The restrictions really bothered South Africa since no international team could play a game against that country's team until they included other racial groups and not just whites.

Jean: It was so scandalous that a country in which whites were only a minority should have all-white sports teams “representing” them!

Valerie: I think that the ban had a big effect. It helped South Africa to realize how isolated it was. Now things are much different: Apartheid is over, teams are racially integrated, and South Africa even hosted the soccer World Cup in 2010.

Jean: Yes, I went there to see some games. It was really interesting to me how white South Africans were cheering for a mostly black South African team. Sports can really help bring people together. Also, it would be very hard for a team to be banned from international sports. No wonder Saudi Arabia doesn’t want to be excluded! Yet, their oppression of women as every bit as bad as the racial oppression used to be in South Africa. So maybe the International Olympic Committee SHOULD apply the same standards and ban Saudi Arabia from participating.

Valerie: Aneesa, you are Muslim, Arab, and a woman. What do you think?

Aneesa: It’s a hard question. On the one hand, in other Arab, Muslim countries, women have a lot more rights than in Saudi Arabia. Saudi women are limited in where and if they can drive a car! They can’t go out without wearing a veil. They need their husband’s permission to go abroad. Until recently, they couldn’t even vote or be elected to office. That’s much different from Iraq or Egypt, for example, two other countries that are both Arab and Muslim. Saudi Arabia has a much stricter interpretation of Islam than other countries. So part of me feels sympathy for women in that country and would love to see international pressure to encourage more rights for Saudi women.

Valerie: Just “part of you” feels that way?

Aneesa: Well, there is another side. How can the international community dictate another country’s religious values? It seems that the West is always trying to impose its values on us, as if we can’t think for ourselves!

Jean: (to Valerie) You see? It’s a very complicated issue: women’s rights versus religious freedom. No wonder the International Olympics Committee is having trouble making a decision.

Epilogue:

characters: same as in the prologue

setting: a high school classroom somewhere in the United States

Luis: So you see, sports *is* a topic of serious historical inquiry! Internal politics (within a country) and international politics (relations between countries) are reflected in sporting events. Our example of the Iranian soccer players wearing green armbands shows how sports can be a forum for political protest. The other example of the Moroccan

government's involvement in soccer shows how governments can use sports to control nationalism, focusing emotions on international, rather than internal, issues.

Mark: Sports teams and events also make a national statement to the world. Just looking at the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, you can see how Israel uses sports in the struggle against world prejudice and terrorism – and how Palestinians use sports in the struggle to express their national identity. You can also see the anger that both sides feel toward each other: the Israelis because of militant Palestinians' use of terror, the Palestinians because of Israeli restrictions on all aspects of their lives and denial of their existence as a people.

Amy: Of course, studying sports also brings to life social issues, such as questions of women's rights and the controversy over freedom of religious expression. That's why we used the Iranian and Saudi Arabian examples.

Luis: So, that's the end of our project. What do you say, Mrs. Daily?

Mrs. Daily: I say that you three have taught the teacher a valuable lesson about the importance of sports in Middle Eastern history, politics, and culture. Fantastic job!