

# Opinion: Why ISIS declared war on soccer

By Andrés Martínez

It's not surprising that the crazed "Soldiers of the Caliphate" terrorists selected the France-Germany soccer match at the Stade de France as the central target in their assault on Paris. For starters, the match was a high-profile attraction bringing together 80,000 fans, including French President Francois Hollande. As American moviegoers across generations can tell you (see "Black Sunday" or "The Sum of All Fears"), televised sports events present dramatic, desirable targets for terrorists.

Indeed, the Stade de France was the one target in Paris last Friday night where the terrorists must have known they'd encounter a level of security they might not (and ultimately did not, thankfully) overcome. Still they deemed it a worthwhile attempt. At least one and possibly up to three suicide bombers sought to enter the stadium. The first bomber detonated his vest upon being stopped at a security perimeter. Two other suicide bombers blew themselves up outside the stadium; the thwarted bombers only took the life of one victim. The gruesome plan probably entailed sequencing the explosions inside the stadium in such a way that would have killed not only people seated nearby, but also thousands more in an ensuing panicked stampede.

There is another reason why Islamist fanatics intent on a war between civilizations would target a major soccer match: the sport's singular role in bridging western culture and Muslim youth.

Soccer is one form of global pop culture not driven by the United States, but it's still a potent Western influence. If

terrorists in the Middle East spend any time fantasizing about attacking an NFL or NBA game, it'd only be because they know Americans care about those games. But soccer – the global sport centered on Europe's major leagues but drawing in players, fans, and business interests from most of the planet – is an obsession throughout the Muslim world.

The game also offers the most prominent example of successful cross-cultural assimilation within Europe. Some of the most prominent French and German stars in recent years – Germany's Mesmut Özil and Sami Khedira; France's Karim Benzema and Bacary Sagna – are Muslim celebrities of immigrant backgrounds.

The impressive diversity of Europe's soccer leagues and national teams has long been a potent force for disarming xenophobic anti-immigrant sentiment and racism across Europe. North African immigrants have never felt more welcome in France than when the entire nation rallied around Zinedine Zidane, the captain of the 1998 World Cup winning French squad. And it is no small cultural milestone for Turkish immigrants in Germany to have millions of German fans wearing jerseys bearing the name of midfielder artist Özil.

But the converse often gets overlooked: the impact of immigrant players on the mindsets of soccer fans across the Middle East and North Africa – and of crazed terrorists who thrive on the narrative that there is no compatibility between degenerate infidel societies and righteous Muslims.

The sport is a seductress of Muslim youth much to the chagrin of those eager to fend off Western influences. Across the Middle East, soccer has been a galvanizing force in the debates over whether girls should be allowed to play sports. Just look at any photos of large crowds milling about anywhere in the region – whether at a Syrian refugee camp in Jordan or an upscale mall in Dubai or Saudi Arabia – and you will invariably see some people sporting Real Madrid, Barcelona,

Bayern Munich, or Manchester United jerseys.

European games are avidly watched across the region, courtesy of Qatari-owned beIN Sports, the same TV network broadcasting Spanish and French games to U.S. audiences. The success of so many Muslim and immigrant players in the English, Spanish, French, and German leagues provides a constant counter-narrative to tales of immutable estrangement and alienation between West and East. And it isn't just about players – business interests from Muslim countries (most prominently the airlines from the Gulf states) brand themselves through the sport, to a point where people in the Middle East (and as far away as Malaysia, in the case of some teams) proudly feel that certain fabled European clubs belong to them.

In some cases, they literally do. Paris' own iconic team, Paris Saint-Germain F.C., is now owned by Qataris.

The targeting of soccer by jihadists fighting modernity should only intensify as the game's influence continues to expand in the Muslim world. And when you look at the calendar of upcoming major tournaments—with the next two World Cups slated for Russia and Qatar, and next summer's Euro Championship hosted by France, kicking off in the targeted Stade de France—security forces everywhere, not to mention lovers of the game, should consider last Friday night a declaration of war by the terrorists against the world's most beloved sport.

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