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## Palestinians reject Barcelona's proposal for a soccer peace match with Israel



Palestinians have rejected a proposal to join Israeli soccer players in a match against Barcelona, saying the suggestion is 'illogical' and 'impossible'.

The proposal was suggested by the Spanish club's president, Sandro Rosell, who announced that Barcelona planned to play a friendly football match against a joint Israeli-Palestinian team in Tel Aviv at the end of July in the hope of promoting Middle East peace.

Rosell made the announcement alongside Israeli President Shimon Peres during a visit to Tel Aviv.

Israeli FA chairman Avi Luzon said the proposed game at the National Stadium in Tel Aviv on July 31 would be between Barcelona and a squad made up equally of Israeli and Palestinian players managed jointly by both of the national team coaches.

But Palestinians in Gaza have roundly rejected the proposal.

"I totally refuse a joint Israeli-Palestinian soccer game, because this means that we are normalizing with our enemies in Israel, and it is not just me who refuses this, all the Palestinian people do," said Muhammad Siksik, a Palestinian resident in Gaza. "The reason for our [rejection] is because the Palestinian cause cannot be politicised through a sport game with Barcelona. I, as a Barcelona fan, refuse this proposal," added another Gaza resident, Jawdat Ashour.

Even though they live right next to each other, Israeli and Palestinian teams do not play each other in competition, as Israel is a member of European soccer's governing body UEFA, while the Palestinian soccer team plays in Asia.

The head of the Palestinian Football Association in Ramallah, Jibril Rajoub, said there were many obstacles standing in the way of the proposed game.

“For us sport is a tool for spreading love, stability and co-operation with all the world. But the possibility of playing a soccer game with Israeli participants in the absence of Israeli recognition of a national Palestinian sporting body, in accordance with the Olympic charter, and in the absence of recognizing the right of the Palestinian sporting body to practice sport, I think without achieving all this, playing this game will not be possible,” Rajoub told Reuters Television.

Palestinians in Ramallah expressed similar views.

“It is illogical to play with Israelis under the existing circumstances. The second condition they put is that we must play inside Israel. How would we play inside Israel if they don't even recognize our Palestinian national team? How can they play with a team they are not convinced of, unless we are willing to offer concessions, and I think that the Palestinian state is not ready to offer any concessions in the meantime,” explained Hani Baduan, a resident of Ramallah.

“The intentions of the [foreign players] should be to present sport for Palestinians and not to make any plans for normalization,” said another resident, Firas Baduan.

An issue that will have to be addressed for the match to go ahead successfully will be access to the Israeli stadium for Palestinian players and supporters, as Israeli security policy largely bars Palestinians from entering Israel.

Rosell said Peres had undertaken to ensure that all players selected to participate would be permitted to attend.

Barcelona hosted a similar ‘peace match’ at its home stadium, Camp Nou, in 2005.