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## BRIEFING PAPER 12 12 July 2011

Prepared by SK/AFP

### Peres Centre for Peace & The AFL Peace Team

## Providing a Voice

#### The Peres Centre for Peace

IN 1996, Israeli President Shimon Peres established a non-profit organisation in Israel called The Peres Centre for Peace, with chapters in various countries around the world. It claims its mission is to build 'an infrastructure of peace and reconciliation' in the Middle East with an emphasis on building relations between Israelis and Palestinians. That is not the case. The actual intention is to **normalise** the current relationship of occupier and occupied in the most protracted conflict of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

#### Normalisation through sport

One of the Centre's normalisation tactics is to use sport to give the impression of cooperation and normality when such projects are utterly divorced from the daily realities that Palestinians endure. The Centre claims its programs are designed to "instil values of peaceful coexistence" and to allow participants to "foster a profound appreciation of peace". Not only are such sentiments extremely patronising in what is a completely unequal situation, they are downright disingenuous coming from an Occupying state that consistently violates international law and human rights conventions.

Simply, it is impossible for such projects to advance the cause of peace while Israel forces Palestinians to live in walled-in ghettos under a brutal regime of control; builds illegal colonial settlements and the illegal Apartheid Wall that dispossess Palestinians of their land and homes; refuses to lift the suffocating siege on Gaza that has reduced the Gazan population to absolute penury; perpetrates extra-judicial killings and military attacks; and subjects innocent civilians to daily humiliating conditions at hundreds of Israeli military checkpoints throughout the Occupied West Bank.

Against this background, well-meaning people in various countries have enthusiastically involved themselves in the Centre's projects thinking they are a way forward to peace and reconciliation. Nothing could be further from the truth.

#### AFL Peace Team – teaching peace

In 2008, the Peres Centre's Australian Chapter proposed a joint Palestinian-Israeli Australian Football League (AFL) team that has been touted as the brainchild of its Executive Director, Tanya Oziel.

According to the story, Ms Oziel brought 13 Palestinians and 13 Israelis together as teammates to play Australian rules football, a game neither group knew anything about. Ms Oziel was honoured for her contribution to the game through the Peace Team and an Australian documentary was made - *Tackling Peace* - to promote the story of two groups setting aside prejudice and hostility to compete as one united team from across the political divide. It is now being used as an education tool in schools throughout Australia.

#### Israel - criminalising education

In Palestine, however, schools are not so lucky. Israel deliberately targets education. The late Edward Said, an eminent scholar and world-renowned intellectual called it "the criminalization of Palestinian teaching and learning." The incidents of lethal military attacks, raids, harassment, forced closures and onerous obstructions to and from universities and schools are well documented and occur on a regular basis. Israel's siege on Gaza has banned paper and educational materials and prevents students from travelling abroad or even to the West Bank to take up study offers and scholarships. In Israel itself, Palestinians are subjected to an unequal education system - one that provides for Jewish children and one for Palestinian children. The state of classrooms often forces thousands of students to study in rented buildings lacking ventilation, libraries, laboratories, and playgrounds.

As for football grounds, there are barely any proper pitches in Gaza and the main football stadium was bombed by Israeli forces in 2006. In the West Bank, it is not much better with children having to play on concrete.

## The Peace Team in context

It was only a few months after the Peace Team had played in Melbourne that Israel broke the ceasefire and savagely attacked Gaza in an assault of terror that last for three weeks. There was nothing normal about that. Israel devastated the already impoverished Gaza raining down bombs and white phosphorous on innocent people and bombarded houses and families without mercy. Some 1400 people were killed and thousands more were wounded, widowed, orphaned, left homeless. No one was playing football then or talking about peace.

After the assault ended, Israel's siege on Gaza continued without reprieve – food, medicines, fuel, electricity, water and building materials were variously denied entry and with few exceptions, the situation continues to this day.

When a flotilla of human rights activists decided to break the siege in May 2010, Israel attacked the aid ships in international waters and killed nine passengers and wounded hundreds more. The passengers included an 85-year-old holocaust survivor, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and hundreds of activists committed to delivering the most basic kinds of food and medicine to the Gaza Strip.

### Israel's not-so-peaceful overtures to Palestinian football players

- In November 2006, Israel barred team players from leaving Gaza to play against Singapore in the Asian Cup qualifier;
- Israel consistently tries to prevent the Palestinian football team from fielding its first choice players at World Cup qualifiers;
- Israel's restrictions on movement means that the Palestinian team is forced to have its practice sessions in Egypt;
- training players is a challenge for the team manager who never knows which players will get through the checkpoints and manage to arrive in Egypt;
- In 2008, the team was prevented from playing in the AFC Challenge Cup and so was unable to qualify for the 2011 Asia Cup;
- in 2009, Israel's Civil Administration issued a stop-work order on a new soccer stadium being built in Al-Bireh, near Ramallah according to plans approved in 1981 after an 8 year wait.



## International sport as politics

The refrain is often heard that sport and politics should not be mixed, yet, all states use sport to bolster national pride. It is also used to by powerful nations to show that relations with countries that they exploit or oppress are somehow normal and even harmonious. Israel is no less prone to using sport as a way of gaining ideological support for a myth that is totally contrary to what it imposes in Palestine on a daily basis: oppression, destruction, forced destitution and expulsion.

Israel uses sport to depoliticise what are in fact the discriminatory conditions in its own society and its occupation of the Palestinians by putting the focus on the sporting prowess of individuals and their service to an illusory peace. However, that "feel-good" coming together in a few football games is momentary and does not end the entrenched racism or the oppression that is the lot of people's every day lives.

Buying into such a normalisation program serves the designs of the oppressor not the oppressed. It is simply pandering to a monstrous lie.

## This year's AFL Peace Team

A second AFL Peace Team has been formed to participate in this year's AFL International Cup in August and already it is being held up as demonstrating to Australians and the world, that Israelis and Palestinians can and do continue to work together to reach common goals.

AFL legend Robert 'Dipper' PierDomenico will coach the Peace Team and former Sydney Swans Captain Brett Kirk has trained with the AFL Peace team in Israel. AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou said of the last peace team "it worked...it was a great success."

Meanwhile back in Israel/Palestine, the Israeli administration's subjugation of the Palestinian people has intensified with daily reports of home evictions, house demolitions, new discriminatory bills before the Knesset and even more brutal tactics used against nonviolent protesters resisting the Occupation. Football normalcy is as remote a dream as peace and it would simply be impossible to measure the Peace Team's success against this grinding reality.

Clive Grainger, "What is the Peres Centre up to?", Palestine Monitor, December 2010

Ismael Patel, "Blow the whistle on Israel: England's forthcoming soccer match with Israel conflicts with the campaign to keep racism out of sport", The Guardian, March 2007

Amira, Hass, "What does Israel have against a Palestinian stadium?", Haaretz, November 2009

Tobias Buck, "The not-so-beautiful game of football in Israel", January 2010