Iraqi team wins Asian Cup, captain condemns US occupation

Patrick Martin
31 July 2007

The 1-0 victory by the Iraqi soccer team in Sunday's Asian Cup featured a brilliant goal on a header by Younis Mahmoud, the team's 24-year-old captain. This was followed by an "own goal" for the Bush administration and its Iraqi stooge regime, which had hoped to reap a propaganda windfall from the event.

Instead, Mahmoud told a worldwide television audience that he dared not return to his homeland because of the conditions created by the US occupation. "I want America to go out," he said. "Today, tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, but out. I wish the American people didn't invade Iraq and hopefully it will be over soon."

Mahmoud said he would return to the Persian Gulf sheikdom of Qatar, where he plays on a professional team. "I don't want the Iraqi people to be angry with me," he said. But "if I go back with the team, anybody could kill me or try to hurt me." He added, "One of my closest friends, they came to arrest him, and for one year neither me nor his family knew where he is."

The Iraqi team's unexpected progress through the quadrennial tournament was greeted with enthusiasm throughout the country, and many saw the national team's effort, uniting players of all ethnic and religious backgrounds, as a welcome rebuff to the increasingly vicious sectarian conflict at home.

The winning goal came on a corner kick by Hawar Mohammed, a Kurd, headed into the net by Mahmoud, a Sunni Turkoman from Kirkuk (Ironically, Kurdish nationalist parties are campaigning for Kirkuk, and its nearby oilfields, to be transferred to the control of the Kurdish regional government, a demand adamantly opposed by Turkoman and Arab groups, both Sunni and Shiite).

Goalkeeper Noor Sabri Abbas, a Shiite, played a central role in the Iraqi team's progress through the field, posting four consecutive shutouts, including the semi-final victory over South Korea where he blocked two shots in the final shootout after a regulation 0-0 tie, resulting in a 4-3 victory for the Iraqi team. During the tournament, Sabri's brother-in-law was killed in a bombing, and two other team members lost relatives during the same period.

Other incidents in the month-long tournament reflected the terrible conditions in the occupied and war-torn country. Mahmoud, the captain and final-winning star, was detained at the airport in Bangkok, Thailand for 12 hours and nearly missed the opening game. The entire team wore black armbands for the final against Saudi Arabia to honor the memory of the dozens of fans killed by two car bombs during celebrations of the semi-final victory.

The political leaders of the US-backed puppet government in Baghdad sought to associate themselves with the national team. Before the final, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki promised each member of the team a $10,000 bonus. State television broadcasts described al-Maliki making congratulatory phone calls to the team, at a time when the television pictures showed all the players celebrating out on the field.

President Jalal Talabani pledged an additional $10,000 to each player and $20,000 to Mahmoud after the victory. But Talabani admitted that it might not even be possible to stage a welcome-home celebration in the Iraqi capital because of security considerations. "We will receive them in Baghdad airport. If that's not possible, Irbil or Sulaymaniya," he said, referring to the main cities in the Kurdish region.

The American media was geared up for an orgy of propaganda, seeking to use the soccer victory as a metaphor for a military victory by the US and puppet forces over the anti-occupation resistance. Mahmoud's

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forthright opposition to the occupation—a sentiment shared by the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi population—did not fit that script, so it was relegated to a near-footnote in newspaper reports by the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*, and omitted entirely in broadcast reports by NBC, ABC, CBS and Fox. Only Fox even reported Mahmoud's comments on its web site, in an AP story.

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