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[Daniel Falcone](#)

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The Amsterdam Attacks: The Politics of Collective Violence



Youtube screengrab.

Introduction

This article contains and curates Middle East historian [Lawrence Davidson's](#) collection of [Mouin Rabbani's](#) tweets on the 2024 Amsterdam football riots. Read them while they last. Rabbani, a director of the Palestine American Research Center, is a leading analyst on Palestinian politics and Middle Eastern affairs. A senior fellow at the [Institute for Palestine Studies](#), he is widely known for his various international contributions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and his writings can be found in *Foreign Policy*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Middle East Report*, and *the New York Times*.

The [Maccabi Tel Aviv soccer club](#) is commonly known for its intense fanbase, like many large soccer clubs internationally. Occasionally, fans attract collections of supporters who engage in collective violence or aggressive acts and behaviors, especially in reaction to “[contested political symbolism](#).” On November 8, 2024, the *Associated Press* stated that “Israeli fans were assaulted after a soccer game in Amsterdam by hordes of young people apparently riled up by calls on social media to target Jewish people, Dutch authorities said Friday. Five people were treated at hospitals and dozens were arrested after the attacks, which were condemned as antisemitic by authorities in Amsterdam, Israel and across Europe.” Large portions of the story have since been [revised](#).

On November 10, 2024, the *New York Times* wrote that, “street disturbances began Wednesday night, a full day before the match, after Maccabi fans began arriving in Amsterdam. Authorities in Amsterdam said supporters of Maccabi had taken down a Palestinian flag from a building. A video posted to social media [showed] men climbing a building to tear down a Palestinian flag while others nearby shout[ed] anti-Arab chants. Tensions had mounted a day earlier when Israeli fans vandalized a taxi and burned a Palestinian flag in the city.”

The western press and leading supporters of Israel, including President Biden were quick to categorize the fans acting in self-defense. United States Representative Ritchie Torres took to [X](#) to write: “As we remember the [86th Anniversary of Kristallnacht](#), we in America must summon the moral courage to stand up, speak out, and act against antisemitism with fierce urgency of now. If antisemitism is allowed to fester freely, aided by the silence and cowardice of a complacent center, the nightmare of pogroms and [Kristallnacht(s)] in America will become not a question of ‘if’ but a question of ‘when.’ Amsterdam should be an awakening for America.”

Quickly challenging the dominant narrative, savvy political commentator and journalist [Idrees Ahmad](#), stayed with the story as it unfolded and questioned the pogrom characterization citing the rabid fan base’s extremist songs, flag burning, and hateful chants targeting Gazans, that mainly referenced civilians and children.

Mouin Rabbani’s X Account

Context

[Rabbani explained](#) how that, “For over a decade the football governing bodies FIFA, the International Federation of Football Associations, and UEFA, the Union of European Football Associations, have consistently rejected demands to suspend or expel the Israel Football Association (IFA) and individual Israeli football clubs from their ranks.” [Jules](#)

[Boykoff and Dave Zirin](#) have documented the glaring double standard in failing to suspend Israel in writing for the *Nation*.

In another tweet, [Rabbani elaborated](#) on how, “FIFA and UEFA have been formally requested to do so by the Palestinian Football Association (PFA) on multiple occasions, and have additionally been called upon to adopt measures against the IFA by a variety of activists and fans who launched the [Red Card Israeli Racism campaign](#).” *BBC* also reported about a month ago on the apparent breaches that rendered a FIFA investigation.

History

Rabbani touched on the [historical implications](#) in this tweet: “demands to sanction Israeli football were made on a variety of grounds: that Israel is an institutionally racist state and should be treated no differently than apartheid [South Africa \(suspended by FIFA in 1961\)](#) and [Rhodesia \(suspended in 1970\)](#); that the IFA includes clubs based in illegal settlements in the illegally-occupied Palestinian territories; that the IFA discriminates against Palestinian clubs; that IFA teams discriminate against Palestinian players; that Israel in 2019 prevented the PFA cup final from taking place when it prohibited the [Khadamaat Rafah team traveling from the Gaza Strip](#) to the West Bank to play against Balata FC; that Israel has killed and maimed Palestinian players; that Israeli clubs systematically tolerate racist and genocidal conduct by supporters; and a variety of other grounds, most recently that Israel is perpetrating genocide against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip that has resulted in the killing of numerous Palestinian players, officials, and staff.”

The following [thread](#) shows Rabbani’s continued explanation, context and summary:

“[The PFA petitions](#) were based not only on general principles or international human rights treaties, but rather, and primarily, FIFA’s and UEFA’s own regulations, which explicitly prohibit the conduct Israel, the IFA, and various IFA teams are engaged in.”

“[On each occasion](#) FIFA and UEFA have rejected the PFA’s and Red Card Israeli Racism campaign’s demands on the grounds that sport and politics should not mix. On the same principle, namely that sports and politics must be strictly separated, teams and players who engage in gestures of solidarity with the Palestinians, or display symbols such as the Palestinian flag, have been fined and punished.”

“[Glasgow Celtic](#), which strongly identifies with the Palestinian cause, is in this respect the most notable example. In 2014 it was fined GBP 16,000 after fans raised the [Palestinian flag](#) during a Champions League qualifier against KR Reykjavik of Iceland. In 2022 it was fined GBP 8,619 after fans displayed hundreds of Palestinian flags during a match against

Israel's [Hapoel Be'ersheva](#). In the latter case Celtic supporters responded by raising not only the full amount of the fine, but also a six-figure sum that was promptly disbursed to various Palestinian charities."

"Elsewhere, individual [players have also been sanctioned](#). In one of many such examples, in January 2024 the Asian Football Confederation fined [Jordan's Mahmoud Al-Mardi](#) for displaying the slogan "Palestine is the Cause of the Honourable" on his undershirt after he scored a goal against Malaysia during the Asian Cup."

"[FIFA's position on the strict separation](#) between sports and politics is at least in theory an arguable proposition, but it was never consistently applied. [Fans of Ajax](#), the Dutch club that hosted Maccabi Tel Aviv for the Europa League match on 7 November, for example, routinely waved giant Israeli flags in support of their team and were consistently able to do so freely. It was only when supporters of opposing clubs began waving Palestinian flags in response that action was taken by the football authorities to ban both symbols."

"More importantly, the reasoning adopted by FIFA and UEFA ultimately proved to be a complete sham enveloped in brazen hypocrisy. Specifically: within days of the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, both FIFA and UEFA [suspended the Russian Football Union](#) and every single [Russian football club](#). The entire process literally took less than a week. And in contrast to the suppression of gestures in support of the Palestinians, explicit solidarity with Ukraine, and the prominent display of the Ukrainian flag, were if anything encouraged."

"As for the latest [PFA application to FIFA to sanction Israel](#) on a variety of grounds, submitted this May and supported among others by the Asian Football Confederation, FIFA President [Gianni Infantino](#) has ensured his organization moves even slower than the International Criminal Court (ICC). Most recently, and after months of foot-dragging and refusing to even put the PFA petition on the FIFA agenda, [Infantino](#) in October announced that an investigation would be conducted to assess the PFA's case, but refused to announce a date on which this would be completed, or its results announced. Had he behaved similarly in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, he would have been dismissed faster than you can say 'Infantino is a tool'."

Pro-Palestinian Activists Sought to Have the Ajax-Maccabi Tel Aviv Fixture of 7 November Cancelled, Rabbani cont'd.

"It is against this background, and that of the long- and well-established reputation of Maccabi Tel Aviv's fanbase for uninhibited genocidal racism, that pro-Palestinian activists sought to have the Ajax-Maccabi Tel Aviv fixture of 7 November cancelled. When they

predictably failed, the activists announced they would be holding a [protest at the Ajax stadium](#), the [Johan Crujff Arena](#), on the day of the game. Just as predictably, this too was rejected by the Amsterdam municipality and police, who ordered the activists to hold their protest at a location some distance from the stadium. The activists complied, and their demonstration passed without incident.”

“The violence that has been in the news for the past several days did not start during or after the game, but rather the day before it and even earlier. Several thousand Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, as is common for such events, had traveled to Amsterdam to attend their team’s away game. But rather than conducting themselves responsibly, or engaging in [hooliganism](#) directed at supporters of the opposing team or random passers-by – phenomena which are not uncommon in the world of football – the Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters set their sights on a different target altogether: Arabs.”

“Not only do the Israeli club’s supporters have a reputation for genocidal racism (their motto is ‘[Death to the Arabs](#)’, supplemented with the chant, ‘[May Your Village Burn](#)’), but many of those who traveled to Amsterdam have during the past year served in the Israeli military’s genocidal campaign [against the Palestinians](#) in the Gaza Strip.”

“Imagining themselves to have the same liberties they are accustomed to in Israel, they began attacking private homes in Amsterdam that had the Palestinian flag on display in solidarity with Gaza; assaulting individuals of Arab appearance, including a number of Dutch-Moroccan taxi drivers; vandalized a number of taxis, completely destroying one; and more generally taunting those within earshot with chants of ‘We’ll Fu*k the Arabs’, ‘Fu*k you Palestine’, ‘Let the IDF Win to Fu*k the Arabs’, and ‘[There is No School in Gaza Because there are No Children Left](#)’.”

“Simply put, these foreign terrorists – arming themselves with sticks, bicycle chains, and various other implements – rampaged through the center of the Dutch capital, subjecting the city and its residents to a racist reign of terror. In this regard [@ashatenbroeke](#) reports that for days before the match, chat groups of pro-Palestinian activists had been warning members not to wear keffiyehs, Palestinian buttons, or other visibly Palestinian items in public because such people were being physically assaulted and spat upon by Maccabi Tel Aviv supporters.”

Rabbani on the Amsterdam Police

“The Amsterdam police for the most part let their honoured Israeli guests go their merry way and refrained from intervening. Indeed, there are several videos of police cars simply driving past physical assaults and similar incidents, as if attacks on residents by visiting

Israeli thugs is completely normal behaviour. In one incident recounted by @ashatenbroeke that was filmed, Israeli hooligans threw a serving of French fries with mayo at an individual then beat them up. The police in this case did make an arrest – of the individual assaulted.”

“As the game approached, the Israeli supporters were escorted to the stadium by the Amsterdam police force, apparently also a common practice in such circumstances but in this case likely intensified given widespread condemnation of Israel’s genocide and the attendant security risks. On their way to the stadium, gangs of Israeli supporters continued with their violent behaviour, all the while chanting their genocidal slogans. The Amsterdam police force is no less racist than its counterparts elsewhere in Europe or for that matter [in] the West and did not arrest one of the Israeli hooligans. It doesn’t take much imagination to understand how the police escort would have responded to supporters of an Arab club marching through the center of Amsterdam chanting ‘Death to the Jews’ and assaulting anyone wearing a kippa.”

“Once inside the stadium, and before the game started, the Israeli supporters observed the minute of silence commemorating the hundreds who recently died in floods in Spain’s Valencia with loud whistles, more racist chanting, and setting off flares. As the supporters left the stadium, their genocidal racism now intensified by [the 5-0 drubbing administered to their club by Ajax](#), they essentially picked up where they had left off before entering the stadium earlier that evening. This time, their intended victims fought back.”

“According to some accounts the response was prepared and organized, according to others it was spontaneous. Most likely there were elements of both. Those who confronted the Israeli hooligans have typically been described as primarily consisting of Dutch Moroccans, with aggrieved taxi drivers prominent among them. More accurately they were primarily youths, consisting of many Amsterdammers of Arab origin but also others.”

“In contrast to their previous inertia the Amsterdam police now swung into action, [arresting approximately 60 of the Dutch defenders](#) but again not a single Israeli. All but 4 were later released. Many more arrests are expected in the coming days and weeks based on CCTV footage and the like. But these too won’t include a single Israeli because they have left The Netherlands and enjoy total impunity in Israel. Rather, they are playing the heroic victim to popular and official acclaim in Israel, and indeed that of Western elites and media. The energetic support of the Amsterdam police notwithstanding, the Israeli hooligans discovered that fistfights on the streets of Amsterdam are somewhat more

challenging than killing babies in Gaza. A number were beaten up, and five required hospitalization. (All were discharged from hospital the following day).”

“At this point Kafka and Alice in Wonderland jointly seized control. In the words of @elydia35, this was ‘[Probably the first time in history](#) we’ve seen world leaders offer their thoughts and prayers to football hooligans’. It is if anything a massive understatement.”

“Almost immediately Western leaders and media commentators began describing the events as a ‘[pogrom](#)’. Not by the genocidal Israeli thugs but rather against them. As if the police encouraged the attacks against the Israelis rather than allowing Israeli gangs to rampage through the city they are paid to keep secure.”

“Instead of being correctly framed as a confrontation between Israeli hooligans and those they sought out, it was transformed into a massive hunt against ‘Jews’. Genocide Joe, who still maintains he has seen images that don’t exist of beheaded Israeli babies, likened the disturbances in Amsterdam initiated by the Israeli hooligans to the rise of Nazism and preliminary phases of the Holocaust. He was far from alone in this respect. That this was an anti-Semitic rampage and nothing else and nothing less immediately became an article of faith.”

“With the commemoration of 1938’s 9-10 November Kristallnacht, a key milestone on the way to the Holocaust, only days away, the comparisons flew fast and furious. As if it was Jewish properties and not those displaying Palestinian symbols or of Arab appearance that were being vandalized and smashed. Selective outrage, and selective condemnation, enjoyed another moment of triumph.”

“Just as history commenced only on 7 October 2023, [@ashatenbroeke](#) notes that the response to the Amsterdam disturbances have simply elided anything and everything that transpired before the end of the Ajax-Maccabi Tel Aviv match. Even by the abysmal standards set by the media during the past year with respect to Palestine, coverage of Amsterdam very successfully plumbed new depths.”

Rabbani on Geert Wilders

Notable Dutch politician, Geert Wilders, the leader of the Party for Freedom (PVV), known for his extreme right-wing views on immigration, national identity, and religion, has advocated for stricter immigration policies, bans on the Koran, as well as other controversial policies.

“Among the most hysterical reactions has been that of Dutch strongman Geert Wilders, who although not in government effectively rules The Netherlands. Wilders is of partly Indonesian background, and during his youth was due to his appearance often taunted by

racist classmates. Rather than resolving to strive for a society free of racism, he became a peroxide blond and decided that he would defeat his tormenters by becoming the most accomplished racist of them all. A stint working on an Israeli kibbutz, where he was treated no differently than other unpaid labour, also transformed him into a fanatic Zionist and Israel flunkie. He for example continues to insist Jordan is Palestine and has been a vociferous genocide cheerleader from the moment is commenced.”

“After 9/11 Wilders found his calling, and it was Islamophobia. Given the demography of The Netherlands, his poisonous bile was specifically directed at Dutch Moroccans, who he would like to see stripped of their citizenship and deported. Indeed, he was in 2016 convicted by a Dutch court for a 2014 appearance in which he promised his audience that he would ‘arrange’ for ‘less Moroccans’ in The Netherlands.”

“Wilders is very much the ideological heir of the wartime National Socialist Movement (NSB), the blood and soil Dutch fascist party which held that one could not be both Jewish and Dutch. The NSB enthusiastically collaborated with the Nazis during the 1940-1945 occupation, was outlawed after liberation, and its leaders (e.g. [Anton Mussert](#) and [Rost van Tonningen](#)) were variously executed or committed suicide.”

“Wilders’s rabid pronouncements proved too much even for the right-wing liberal (i.e. conservative) VVD, which in 2004 expelled him from its ranks. He thereafter formed the [Party of Freedom \(PVV\)](#), which is not a political party in the normal sense but rather a personal fiefdom with opaque funding solely and wholly controlled by Wilders.”

“Wilders won the 2023 Dutch parliamentary elections on the strength of his positions. But since no party ever wins a majority in Dutch elections, he had to form a coalition with several other parties. Their condition for joining his government was that Wilders forgo the premiership (to which he would normally be entitled) because he would be too great an embarrassment on the European and international stage. Wilders agreed and nominated [Dick Schoof](#), a former spy chief best known for authorizing the illegal surveillance of Dutch citizens, particularly Muslims.”

“[Wilders](#) has even by his own standards reached new heights of hysterical rhetoric in response to the events in Amsterdam. Part of his project is to present anti-Semitism not as a European phenomenon that was exported to the Middle East, but rather a core Islamic value that is being imported into Europe by immigrants.”

“[Refusing to utter a word in defense of Dutch citizens](#) violently assaulted by Israeli thugs, [Wilders](#) has instead spoken of “A pogrom in the streets of Amsterdam”, “Muslims with Palestinian flags hunting down Jews”, “A Jew hunt in Amsterdam” and to top it off, “We

have become the Gaza of Europe”. His solution is to “denaturalize” (i.e. revoke the citizenship) of “radical Muslims” and expel them from the country. His rhetoric about reclaiming The Netherlands from “Islam” would have one think he’s about to reconquer Andalusia and impose similar measures.”

“[Wilders’s Islamophobia is only part of the story](#). There’s also considerable domestic politics at play. He has demanded the immediate resignation of Amsterdam mayor Femke Halsema, who previously led the Green Left Party which represents everything Wilders hates. Although she has been a loyal soldier repressing and demonizing pro-Palestinian activists during the past year, Wilders clearly smells blood and is determined to extract his pound of flesh. He has also attacked the police in [crazy] fashion and condemned the government for what he terms its limp response.”

“[This is best understood](#) as Wilders seeking to ensure that it is he and not Schoof who rules the roost, and to establish power and influence over institutions independently of formal government authority. It’s the authoritarian playbook, which Wilders hopes will eventually catapult him to formal leadership of the country.”

“[Seeking to maintain their own fiefdoms](#), Halsema, Schoof, coalition partners, and other objects of Wilders’s ire have for all intents and purposes adopted the pogrom/Kristallnacht 2024 narrative and gotten with the program. Whichever way the internal power struggle plays out, massive repression of opposition to Israel’s genocide in The Netherlands now seems all but certain.”

Conclusion

Reading the entire Rabbani account is head-spinning and reminds me of how, in 2003, Professor Charles Tilly wrote one of the all-time great sociological books entitled *The Politics of Collective Violence*. In this seminal work he stated that, “human life is one mistake after another” and that, “we make mistakes, detect them, repair them, then go on to make more mistakes.” With arresting detail and a strong command of the past, as well as an interdisciplinary approach, Tilly argued that collective violence shared consistent yet unique properties in specific settings. He pointed out how collective violence entailed specific forms of social interaction, and he tried to measure how participants, victims, perpetrators, and various forms of state coordination yielded different political structures encapsulating violent actions.

Tilly wanted to understand how various forms of government could potentially reduce collective violence by analyzing contentious politics and root causes of structural violence. Tilly covered violence as politics, trends, variations, and explanations for violence, as well

as chapters on rituals, coordinated destruction, opportunism, and brawls, to name a few. One area of the book that always interested me was his [Chapter 4: Violent Rituals](#). Here, he provided how sporting events offered case studies of “scripted damage” and revealed forms of contentious politics and collective violence.

In the chapter, he cites scholars [Andrei Markovitz](#) and [Stephen Hellerman](#) and explains how soccer serves as a form of scripted damage. If anything, the scholars write, “nationalism plays an ever even greater role in team sports than it does individual sports...the team’s collective entity and very being ... supersedes any identification with the individual. Because soccer is the world’s most widely performed team sport played internationally by more nations than represented in the United Nations, nationalism has enjoyed a greater presence in this game... In many cases it has led to ugly riots furthered nationalist excesses, spawned national hatreds and prejudice while appealing to hostility and contempt toward opponents.”

Tilly outlined social identity formation through soccer and explains several terms that make scripted damage possible during matches; they include boundary and cross boundary interactions, polarization, and competitive display. Often European spectators and adjacent soccer followings generate charged up fan bases with politically robust capacities (violence to control populations in the form of state formation) capable of producing harmful behaviors within large crowds and groups.

The world continues to watch the ways in which Western media first turned a blind eye to genocide and now to the outright ethnic intimidation of Arabs. Altered narratives such as the “pogrom thesis” will continue to enable a reproduction of harmful behaviors within large crowds and groups that mislead fans both locally and globally.

CounterPunch will continue to follow the story as it unfolds.

Daniel Falcone is a teacher, journalist, and PhD student in the World History program at St. John’s University in Jamaica, NY as well as a member of the Democratic Socialists of America. He resides in New York City.

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