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AN INSIDE LOOK AT THE FRENCH FOOTBALL FEDERATION'S WOMEN'S FOOTBALL DIPLOMACY PROJECT WITH IRAQ: INSPIRING EVERY GIRL IN IRAQ TO PLAY FOOTBALL

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Abstract


This article examines the French Football Federation's women's football diplomacy initiative with Iraq as an example of a type of integrative sports diplomacy that empowers the sports world, and those they serve, in new ways. The effort, driven by a non-state sporting actor with support from the French state via its Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs' sports diplomacy approach, demonstrated sports diplomacy's short-term "wins" like changing people's minds, cultural engagement, and sharing technical expertise through sports, creating the possibility of new opportunities, and offering different incentives for the sports world to engage.

Keywords: Sports Diplomacy, Football, France, Iraq, Federations, Women's Football Diplomacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Yahya Alkhiro and the Iraqi women's national football team arrived at Paris' Charles de Gaulle Airport for a one-week sports diplomacy and training residency in late January 2024 and immediately made an impact. It was the first such visit for the team, whose coaches hailed from different parts of Iraqi society while the players were mostly from Kurdish families. But it was a continuation of the women's football diplomacy initiative launched in 2021 by the French Football Federation (FFF) with the Iraq Football Association (IFA) that has since trained over 200 Iraqi players, coaches, and others within the country's nascent women's football ecosystem. The series of trainings in Iraq and France, led by FFF Deputy National Technical Director Ludovic Debru and his team in partnership with the IFA's *chef de mission* and coach Thaer Kadhim Alarass, was a new way for the federations to engage with each other and the diplomatic realm.

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The Iraqis' arrival was a special, symbolic start to the week in France. The Lionesses of Mesopotamia, easily spotted in the airport thanks to their red travel uniforms, were pulled aside by French visa officers upon landing. Alkhiro, the group's translator, explained that they were *en route* to a camp at Clairefontaine, the mythical National Football Institute (INF) whose legendary grounds train some of the world's best players, including perennial FIFA World Cup finalists Les Bleus. The officials were impressed, for as Alkhiro noted, 'they were amazed that a country like us has a women's football team, because the image of Iraq in international media is just about bombs and jihadists.' He was happy at making such an impression. 'That officer changed his mind about us as a country,' Alkhiro said of just one way that this unique sports diplomacy initiative already paid dividends.¹

The practice of sports diplomacy, commonly understood as the communication, representation, and negotiation that occur in and around the sporting terrain, has become ever-more diffuse. Governments and their officially credentialed representatives engage in it, but so, too, do a wide range of non-state sports actors who make up the international sports world, from international and national sports federations to leagues, teams, athletes, coaches, sponsors, NGOs and more. Sports diplomacy is recognized as a useful tool to cultivate cachet, to lead and influence, and to work across the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. That's because globalization of the sports industry, thanks to a range of factors that include increased labour migration, Internet connectivity and the rise of social media, has democratized the concept of who engages in types of sports diplomacy.²

The French-Iraqi case represents a newer blueprint for how the sports diplomacy of national federations can lead the way. It is one of the first comprehensive examples of non-state sports actors partnering with a state on bilateral women's football efforts. The FFF's women's football diplomacy initiative with Iraq partnered with, but was not driven by, a government, in this case, the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs. It was one way for the FFF to build on its educational mission, to help grow the game, and share its hard-earned expertise developing elite players and coaches, all while contributing to the growth of women's football. For the IFA, the partnership was a way to rebuild capacity, made possible through the country's bilateral diplomatic relationship with France.

The project thus illuminates how non-state sports actor-driven sports diplomacy builds a network that can contribute to the larger engine of formal government-driven policy while making sporting, cultural, and diplomatic contributions. The program was just three years old when this article went to press, thus assessments of long-term impact were limited. But from oral history interviews conducted with French and Iraqi participants in 2024, there were clear markers of "success" in how people's minds were changed and possibilities for new opportunities for participants created. This type of integrative sports diplomacy can thus

1 All Yahya Alkhiro quotes in this work, unless specified, from Yahya Alkhiro, Interview with the author, February 1, 2024.

2 Stuart Murray, *Sports Diplomacy: Origins, Theory and Practice*, First Edition. (London, New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351126960>; Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman, "Mapping the Relationship between International Sport and Diplomacy," *Sport in Society* 17, no. 9 (2013): 1098–1118, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.856616>; J. Simon Rofe, "Sport and Diplomacy: A Global Diplomacy Framework," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27, no. 2 (2016): 212–230, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592296.2016.1169785>; Geoffrey Allen Pigman and J. Simon Rofe, "Sport and Diplomacy: An Introduction," *Sport in Society* 17, no. 9 (2013): 1095–1097, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.856612>.

better empower the sports world—and those they serve—in new ways.

2. THE BACKGROUND

That the FFF prioritized this type of women's football diplomacy may come as a surprise for some, given how the sport was negatively stigmatized and under-resourced in France for so long (and remains the case today to a certain extent).³ Women's football was first developed within late nineteenth century Britain, and by the First World War, France, too, was an early influencer.⁴ The game's development was then paused for decades in some parts of the world thanks to various legal bans and societal taboos on women playing the game.⁵ There were many elites, opinion-makers, cultural trend-setters, and football officials themselves who thought it was too violent, too dangerous, too masculine a sport for women and girls to play and that it did not conform to ideals of beauty or femininity, including in France.⁶ The discipline has evolved since the 'second wave' of feminism in the late 1960s and 1970s, and now leads multiple discussions at the intersection of development, gender, education, health, ethnicity, religion, identity, migration, and more.

France exemplifies a paradox when it comes to women's football.⁷ Despite leading in certain ways, such as boasting the world's most winning professional club in Olympique Lyonnais Féminin, development of the game at home lags. England's claim as the modern football incubator still carries cultural clout, and the significant growth of and investment in its Women's Super League (WSL) has created an 'arms' race for European professional football.⁸ The United States is also a leader in the space, thanks to generations of Title IX beneficiaries who have made the U.S. women's national team (USWNT) the most winning national side in history.⁹ Yet, it is France that's emerged as a leading stakeholder engaged in federation-

3 The FFF also confronted difficulties in communications messaging following a series of scandals in the 2010s and 2020s that exposed sexual harassment and misogyny at different levels of the organization. According to Debru, the federation undertook the Iraqi project for altruistic reasons, not to "window dress" its public reputation. Ludovic Debru, Interview with the Author, April 16, 2024.

4 Laurence Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire Du Football Féminin Au XXe Siècle*, Collection "Espaces et Temps Du Sport" (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003); Jean Williams, *Globalising Women's Football* (Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Oxford, Wien: Peter Lang, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-3-0352-0205-2>; Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "The Up-Front Legacies of France 2019: Changing the Face of 'Le Foot Féminin,'" *Sport in History* 39, no. 4 (2019): 462–483, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460263.2019.1667420>.

5 Jean Williams, *The History of Women's Football* (Barnsley, UK: Pen & Sword History, 2021).

6 Prudhomme-Poncet, *Histoire Du Football Féminin Au XXe Siècle*; Mary Lynn Stewart, *For Health and Beauty: Physical Culture for Frenchwomen, 1880s-1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Krasnoff, "The Up-Front Legacies of France 2019."

7 Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "The Paradox of French Women's Football," in *The Geopolitical Economy of Football: Where Power Meets Politics and Business*, eds. Simon Chadwick, Paul Widdop, and Michael M. Goldman (London, New York: Routledge, 2024), 95-104.

8 See Jean Williams, *Legendary Lionesses: The England Women's Football Team, 1972-2022* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-36760-1>; Alex Culvin and Ali Bowes, *Women's Football in a Global, Professional Era*, First edition, Emerald Studies in Sport and Gender (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing, 2023); Suzanne Wrack, *A Woman's Game: The Rise, Fall, and Rise Again of Women's Soccer* (Chicago, IL: Triumph Books LLC, 2022).

9 See Yoav Dubinsky, "The Nation Branding, Public Diplomacy and the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup: US against the World," in *The Geopolitical Economy of Football*, eds. Simon Chadwick, Paul Widdop, and Michael M. Goldman (London; New York: Routledge, 2024), 227-234; Caitlin Murray, *The National Team: The inside Story of the Women Who Changed Soccer* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019); Jeré Longman, *The Girls Of Summer* (Harper Collins, 2001).

to-federation football diplomacy.¹⁰ Although the 2023 World Cup provided the opportunity for confederation-to-confederation football diplomacy as cohosts Australia (Asian Football Confederation) and New Zealand (Oceania Football Confederation) partnered to deliver one of the best-attended women's football tournaments to date, the French-Iraqi partnership is the first comprehensive examples of bilateral federation efforts. This development reflects the country's reputation as one of the standard-bearers of how to detect and train youth development—and do it well, as well as the French government's deployment of sports diplomacy in service of its international relations agenda.

French sports diplomacy is today known, alongside its Australian counterpart, as one of the world's gold standards.¹¹ While the Third Republic engaged in early sports diplomacy, it was the Fifth Republic's investment in sport as a domestic and international tool that put ever-greater attention on the role played by the country's sportspeople.¹² This began after 1960 with the investment of more resources to prepare elite athletes to win for the nation, and included attempts to incur influence in former areas of empire in Africa, which at times clashed with efforts by Washington.¹³ Early returns started to pay off in the 1980s and 1990s, marked by the famous 1998 FIFA World Cup win on home soil.

By the 2010s, French sports diplomacy entered a new era. The country became a known 'land of champions'; by early August 2018, weeks after Les Bleus won that summer's FIFA World Cup, some 150 French sportsmen and women were World, Olympic, or Paralympic champions.¹⁴ Outside of elite sport, many of these same athletes competed in the world's top professional leagues, and cultivated informal influence and cachet. They thus blurred the line between official diplomats in service of the nation and nonofficial representatives

10 In addition to the Iraqi project, the FFF has since launched a similar program with the Ghana Football Association to train up its women's U20 team.

11 Richard Parrish, "EU Sport Diplomacy: An Idea Whose Time Has Nearly Come," *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 60, no. 5 (2022):1511-1528, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcms.13317>; Richard Parrish et. al, "Promoting a Strategic Approach to EU Sport Diplomacy Final Report" (Rijeka: University of Rijeka, Faculty of Law, 2021). Some of Australia's sports diplomacy programs in the Pacific are in partnership with the Australian Soccer Federation, although some of those efforts hinge on tours of the Matildas (the national team) throughout the region. See Tia Soakai, "Pacific Step-Up Tour Brings Westfield Junior Matildas Back to Oceania," *Oceania Football Confederation* (blog), July 30, 2019, accessed November 10, 2024, <https://www.oceaniafootball.com/pacific-step-up-tour-brings-westfield-junior-matildas-back-to-oceania/>.

12 Paul Dietschy, "Creating Football Diplomacy in the French Third Republic, 1914-1939," in *Soccer Diplomacy: International Relations and Football since 1914*, ed. Heather L. Dichter (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2020), 30-47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12sdv7x.6>; Jean-François Loudcher et al., "Did the 1904 Entente Cordiale Originate in Bordeaux Thanks to Sports in 1895? Reflections on Sport Diplomacy," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 40, no. 2-3 (2023): 125-141, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2023.217727>; Quentin Tonnerre, "The 1928 Olympic Winter Games in St Moritz: Tourism, Diplomacy and Domestic Politics," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 38, no. 13-14 (2021): 1385-1402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2021.1910238>; Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, *The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958-2010* (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2012).

13 Krasnoff, *The Making of Les Bleus: Sport in France, 1958-2010*; Pascal Charitas, "A More Flexible Domination: Franco-African Sport Diplomacy during Decolonization, 1945-1966," in *Diplomatic Games: Sport, Statecraft, and International Relations since 1945*, eds. Heather L. Dichter and Andrew L. Johns, (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 2014), 183-214; Pascal Charitas and David-Claude Kemo-Keimbou, "The United States of America and the Francophone African Countries at the International Olympic Committee: Sports Aid, a Barometer of American Imperialism? (1952-1963)," *Journal of Sport History* 40, no. 1 (2013): 69-91, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jsporthistory.40.1.69>; Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, *Basketball Empire: France and the Making of a Global NBA and WNBA* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023).

14 L'Équipe, "La France Qui Gagne," *L'Équipe*, August 2, 2018.

overseas. In fact, by 2024 the NBA San Antonio Spurs' Victor Wembanyama was arguably the best ambassador of France in the United States.¹⁵

This evolution was underpinned by a new official sports diplomacy strategy unfurled by the French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs (MFA) in 2013. For the first several years this policy focused on three key pillars: to increase French influence in sport, to prioritize sport for the MFA and its networks, and to enshrine sport as a key part of the country's economic diplomacy.¹⁶ That policy drove and supported successful French bids to host sporting mega events, from EuroBasket 2015 and UEFA Euro 2016 to FIFA World Cup 2019, Rugby World Cup 2023, and the Paris 2024 Games. In October 2021, the MFA revised its sports diplomacy focus to promote France as an attractive SME host, advance French sports industry's businesses and expertise, stimulate the sports sector's technical and knowledge expertise, nourish use of the French language at sporting events, and to implement the Paris 2024 legacy plan.¹⁷

Moreover, this sports diplomacy agenda compliments France's 'feminist foreign policy,' a commitment to advocating gender equality internationally.¹⁸ It's a reflection of an at-home push since 2022, but implemented by a law effective January 1, 2024 that mandates gender parity on the executive committees for domestic sports governance bodies. This translates into gender parity on leadership and decision-making bodies from the French national Olympic committee and national sports federation levels to regional sports entities.

Since 1998, the French developed a reputation for being one of the world's premier football producers thanks to its famed youth detection and development systems. It's a status earned initially by the men's national team: FIFA World Cup champions (1998, 2018) and vice champions (2006, 2022), European champions (2000) and vice champions (2016), and 2021 UEFA Nations League victors. Such sustained elite-level success generation after generation was underpinned by the country's football player production pipeline, most of who play in the best leagues worldwide and have made France the world's second largest exporter of players.¹⁹

This system also focuses on elite development of female players, a legacy of hosting World

15 James Herbert, "French Revolution: Victor Wembanyama, the 2024 Olympics and the 'huge Boom' That Could Be Coming," CBSSports.com, January 24, 2024, <https://www.cbssports.com/nba/news/french-revolution-victor-wembanyama-the-2024-olympics-and-the-huge-boom-that-could-be-coming/>; Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "How France Made NBA History—Before Victor Wembanyama," *TIME*, October 25, 2023, <https://time.com/6327954/victor-wembanyama-nba-history>.

16 Carole Gomez, "National Report: France," Towards an EU Sport Diplomacy, 2022, https://www.tes-diplomacy.org/pdf/mapping-and-analysis-sport-diplomacies/TES-D_National_report_France.pdf; France French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "Infographic: The main themes of sports diplomacy," France Diplomatie - Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères, <https://pk.ambafrance.org/Infographic-The-main-themes-of-sports-diplomacy>.

17 France, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "France's International Strategy for Sports Diplomacy," France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, December 2023, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/sports-diplomacy/france-s-international-strategy-for-sports-diplomacy/>.

18 France, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "Feminist Diplomacy," France Diplomacy - Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, March 2024, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/feminist-diplomacy/>; France, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, "What Is Feminist Foreign Policy?," 2022, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/diplomatie_fe_ministe_a5_en-v2_1__cle8c266e.pdf.

19 CIES, "Global Study of Football Expatriates (2017-2023) - CIES Football Observatory," accessed March 14, 2024, <https://football-observatory.com/MonthlyReport85>.

Cup 1998. Thus, by the early 2000s, there was an official pathway for girls who aspired to their own football dreams, many inspired by the heroes of 1998. The program gathered the country's best promising talent together and gained the reputation for rigorous quality while also providing unique access to the country's top men's players. As FFF Secretary-General Laura Georges recalled of her Clairefontaine experience as one of its first alumna, 'you are taught by some of the best coaches in France.'²⁰

France established itself as a leader in elite youth detection and formation. Prominent Clairefontaine alumni included Georges, one of the best all-time midfielders Louisa Necib Cadamuro, and 2020s national team dynamo Delphine Cascarino, who was the first to go through the program once it relocated from the INF to the National Institute for Sports (INSEP) on the eastern outskirts of Paris in 2014.²¹ As a result, Les Bleues have ranked among FIFA's top ten teams in the world since 2003, and among its top three for the majority of the past decade; although in March 15, 2024, they were classed third-best in the world, ahead of the United States (No. 4), their inability to perform at the Paris 2024 Olympics resulted in a demotion to 10th place in the August 16 ranking.²² The team has not won a World Cup, European Championship or Olympic medal, although they've come close as semi-finalists at World Cup 2011, Olympics 2012, and Euro2022. In February 2024, Les Bleues attained their first podium finish in a major international competition when they clinched the vice championship of the UEFA Nations League.

3. FFF X IRAQ SPORTS DIPLOMACY

Given this background, it's no surprise that the FFF worked internationally through different knowledge exchange projects to share its hard-won expertise. Typically, such bilateral partnerships centered around training coaches and trainers to empower local officials to level-up their own homegrown indigenous players.²³ What set the FFF's Iraqi project apart was that for the first time it was engaged in a sports diplomacy effort to train-up a country's national team and its football ecosystem stakeholders.

Such efforts can be considered within the context of the warm bilateral diplomatic relationship. Under the presidency of Emmanuel Macron, France has embarked on a project to help Iraq reassert its sense of sovereignty after decades of war, civic unrest, terrorism, and regional tensions.²⁴ The French president visited Baghdad in September 2020 and August 2021, and

20 Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, 'France's World Cup Title will Again Help Women's Soccer', espnW, August 9, 2018, <https://www.espn.com/espnw/sports/article/24319560/france-2018-world-cup-title-help-build-momentum-2019-women-world-cup>.

21 Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "'You Open Their Minds': Why France Moved Their Women's Football Academy Away from Clairefontaine," *The Athletic*, June 27, 2019, <https://theathletic.com/1050454/2019/06/27/you-open-their-minds-why-france-moved-their-womens-football-academy-away-from-clairefontaine/>.

22 FIFA, "Women's Ranking March 2024," March 15, 2024, <https://inside.fifa.com/en/fifa-world-ranking/women>.

23 One such program is the FFF's partnership with Major League Soccer (MLS), which provides specialized coach education for MLS coaches. Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff, "Voice 20: Frédéric Lipka," *FranceAndUs*, accessed April 4, 2024, <https://www.franceussports.com/voices/020-frederic-lipka>.

24 Munqith Dagher, "The Secret Behind the French Interest in Iraq: A Geostrategic Analysis," September 23, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/secret-behind-french-interest-iraq-geostrategic-analysis>; "France's Macron Reasserts Iraq 'sovereignty' on First Official Baghdad Visit," *France 24*, September 2, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200902-macron-to-reassert-iraq-sovereignty-on-first-official-baghdad-visit>.

twice welcomed his Iraqi counterpart.²⁵ Amid Macron's policy bolstering Paris-Baghdad ties and strategic partnerships, football diplomacy plays a role.²⁶

That's why the FFF's women's football diplomacy engagement rewrote the sports diplomacy script and illuminated the different types of impact that such an initiative could have. According to Debru, the federation took up the challenge to help ameliorate the quality and efficiency of the Lionesses, management of the team, and women's football stakeholders within the IFA.²⁷ While a unique new step, the effort fit within the FFF's longer-term efforts exchanging technical and knowledge with others and exporting its unique values and abilities. This was part of its education mission, Debru explained, but also empowered the FFF to work alongside the French diplomatic corps, particularly in promotion of greater gender equality.

'The federation is used to being at the crossroads of sports as an institution. While diplomacy sounds a little bit new for us, we found [through this program] it can be part of our DNA. It helped us understand that it could be natural to do that kind of [sports diplomacy] program. We understood that football opened doors, that sports opened doors.'

The program was also one of the biggest football diplomacy initiatives undertaken by the Iraqis.²⁸

The FFF-Iraqi technical and knowledge exchange trainings and workshops were held in Baghdad, Kurdistan, and at Clairefontaine during Iraqi delegation residencies. Led by Debru and Alarass, participants represent Iraq's elite, professional, and grassroots football ecosystems. Players were from Iraqi Kurdish families, as well as displaced women who lived in camps in Iraq's Kurdish region. They were lucky to have the flexibility from their families to do so, noted Baghdad-based French diplomat Pascal Roos, for 'Iraqi women playing sport, particularly football, is rare.'²⁹ Their participation was also notable in a country known for a conservative society in which women's public sphere participation, including in football stadia, was and remains limited.³⁰

Iraqi women's football was thus not well developed—but that's not to say that it didn't exist. The Lionesses were noted for participation in the 2010 Arabia Women's Football Cup and

25 Embassy of France in Iraq, "Visites françaises en Irak," La France en Irak, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://iq.ambafrance.org/Visites-francaises-en-Irak>; Embassy of France in Iraq, "Visites irakiennes en France," La France en Irak, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://iq.ambafrance.org/Visites-irakiennes-en-France>.

26 Sports diplomacy's use to reinforce a country's self-confidence and sense of place in the international affairs arena was a tool deployed by Robert B. Sherman when he served as U.S. Ambassador to Portugal from 2014–2017, particularly vis-à-vis Euro2016 and the Portuguese women's national football team. Robert B. Sherman, "NYU Advanced Special Projects: Sports Diplomacy Spring 2024 Guest Speaker Appearance," February 20, 2024; Robert B. Sherman, *Ten Million and One: A Perspective on the Portuguese by Obama's Ambassador* (Lisboa: Actual Editora, 2019).

27 Ludovic Debru, Interview with the author, April 16, 2024.

28 Thaer Kadhim Alarass, Interview with the author, February 1, 2024.

29 All Pascal Roos quotes in this article, unless otherwise specified, from Pascal Roos, Interview with the author, March 18, 2024.

30 Nabil Salih, "Why Are There No Women in Iraq's Football Stadiums?," openDemocracy, accessed April 11, 2024, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/north-africa-west-asia/why-are-there-no-women-in-iraq-s-football-stadiums/>.

qualifying rounds for the 2018 AFC Women's Asian Cup; by 2017, FIFA ranked Iraq 107th out of 193 teams worldwide.³¹ But then they were forced into hiatus. The January 2021 reestablishment of the women's team provided a unique opening for the FFF to help rebuild the capacity of Iraqi football.

The French Embassy in Baghdad first identified the needs of the IFA and provided on-the-ground support for the program. For France's Ambassador for Sport, Samuel Ducroquet, diplomats' work locally to develop a network of interlocutors was an important contribution. 'Being able to communicate, understand their means and see the opportunities are, in my opinion, the stepping stones, the first structure of the project,' he said.³² The Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs contributed close to €500,000 in seed funding for the project, which incentivized partners and signalled Quai d'Orsay support. As Ducroquet observed, 'the embassies feel like they're supported by Paris. They have a signal from the capital, and we know that [the project is] worth spending time on.'³³

Football was a natural way for French diplomats to engage with Iraqis, for it was and remains the country's most popular sport. The game and the Iraqi men's team played a national rebuilding role after years of conflict and civil war, thus football was a source of pride across Iraq.³⁴ It was also helpful that France's football reputation for winning competitions, as well as its brand of "Made in France" youth development, were well known. So, too, was the personal involvement of the French ambassador in Baghdad, who persuaded Iraqi football authorities to collaborate for the women's project—a breakthrough for the IFA's resources were invested in the men's game. As French diplomat Roos noted,

'They do not consider women players a priority...it was a bit challenging for [the IFA] to agree to allow a project focused on women's football. I think it's already a success because they agree to put a [spot]light on [women's football] activity. And this is already a big success because it's very meaningful.'

Although the French Embassy identified the need and the Quai d'Orsay contributed funding, the FFF drove the project forward. The federation provided its technical and knowledge expertise, as well as human resources; as a nonprofit governance organisation, it did not receive financial remuneration for its efforts. Instead, it leaned into its goal to promote the development of football. The Iraq project empowered the federation to develop new tools and programs in support of women's football, which could be utilised in other contexts and scenarios.³⁵

31 For more on that match, see Iraq Football Association, "Meet Naba Ameer: Iraq's Youngest Female Player," *Iraq National Team* (blog), October 25, 2017, <https://socceriraq.net/2017/10/25/meet-naba-ameer-iraqs-youngest-female-player/>; FIFA, "World Ranking Iraq," March 15, 2024, <https://inside.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/IRQ?gender=women>.

32 All Samuel Ducroquet quotes in this article, unless otherwise specified, from Samuel Ducroquet, Interview with the author, February 19, 2024.

33 Ducroquet, interview.

34 For more on soccer's role nation-building in Iraq, pre-2007 and post-2007, see Saoud Khalaf, "The Hanging Goalposts of Babylon: Iraq's Football Diversity," <https://www.newarab.com/> (The New Arab, November 6, 2023), <https://www.newarab.com/features/hanging-goalposts-babylon-iraqs-football-diversity>; Danny Mammo, "Iraq & Football: A Remarkable Story of a Sport Lost & Found," *Soccer Politics / The Politics of Football* (blog), December 1, 2009, <https://sites.duke.edu/wcwp/research-projects/middle-east/iraq/>.

35 The FFF's Iraq initiative served as a blueprint for its sports diplomacy project with the Ghanaian U20 women's

While the FFF with its resources, reputation, and world-recognised sport did not need the French government as a partner, the two worked closely. Ducroquet noted that 'it is not the first reflex of the football federation to come and knock the door of the Foreign Ministry to say, "we need you to help."' Yet, sports diplomacy includes putting the means of the foreign ministry in service of sporting institutions. 'It's how we use our diplomatic network to provide support to the sports movement,' he said.³⁶

Debru was tasked to lead the Iraqi project, and he made several trips to Baghdad and Kurdistan to develop a tailored strategy and curriculum. While there, he participated in a match organized by the IFA president, a former footballer, and represented French football to his hosts. 'I saw that there was something important [to them] in the French jersey,' Debru observed for what it symbolized, including excellence in player development. 'They didn't want to see me, per se, they wanted to see the French Football Federation. They want to see France.'³⁷ He also learned how football was one of the only unifiers of Iraq's fractured society, one that endured years of war, dictatorship, civil unrest, and terrorism.

The game was a way to build bridges internally, as well as with the outside world. Alarass, who as a player idolized Brazil's Marta, served as the *chef de mission* for the Iraqi women's national team delegation at Clairefontaine in January 2024, the third group to visit the INF. A thirteen-year veteran women's football coach in both his homeland and Turkey, he spoke of the ways that the program changed perspectives. 'To come to Paris, that opens minds,' Alarass emphasized.

'It is a beautiful city and it's a big dream for [the Iraqis] and, for the Iraqi people, it's hard to go to Europe. When they stay here at Clairefontaine with the famous [French] federation, something really grows in their mentality, [to be] training in Clairefontaine. Every girl in Iraq wants to be playing football. This is the impact of this project because they saw all the players go to this centre, and it's a very good complex.'³⁸

At Clairefontaine, mere months before France hosted the Paris 2024 Games, the Iraqi players engaged in a series of cultural, technical, and knowledge exchanges with their hosts. There were on-pitch training sessions with FFF coaches and tactical specialists to learn the game's more technical aspects. As a result, Alarass noted, they began to improve their ball-handling skills and footwork technique, critical for making better decisions while playing. 'Decision-making depends on skills, and skills depend on minds. I think there is a perfect coordination between these concepts,' he said. Players' early technical improvements were, for him, returns of investment, something he witnessed put into practice by earlier cohorts who participated in the FFF training. 'When the Iraqi league (re)started [in September 2023 after a seven-year absence], I saw something different, technically and mentality,' Alarass said. 'This is what I can call improvement.'

French and Iraqi coaches, referees and other officials engaged in a variety of exchanges along

national team.

36 Samuel Ducroquet, Interview with the author, February 19, 2024.

37 All Ludovic Debru quotes in this article, unless otherwise specified, from Debru, Interview with the author.

38 All Thaeir Alarass quotes in this case study are from Thaeir Kadhim Alarass, Interview with the author, February 1, 2024.

the sidelines and in the classroom. Workshops shared the French game model, plays, and drills that could be integrated into the Iraqi game, an important transmission for many of the Iraqi coaches had full-time jobs within the Ministry for Education, not within sport itself and were not necessarily pure tacticians and technicians. Over shared meals, the visitors shared with their hosts about life back home but also learned about French cuisine and gastronomy. Trips into Paris to visit the country's cultural heritage rounded out the programming.

The 2024 residency furthered intra-squad and inter-federation diplomacy, as well as that between coaches and players. For Alarass, coaches must interrelate with their players thoughtfully and with intention. 'It's our job as a coach to be diplomats, not politicians,' he said of this important correlation with diplomacy.

'I read books about how to deal with players, and with the women players, specifically so that I am diplomatic every time. And I watch my language, I watch my words, what I want to see, what to say. Any wrong words can impact the players and maybe she quits playing... Some coaches make problems because they say something [without thinking].'

Clairefontaine residency weeks were also opportunities of discovery for the project's partners. For Georges, 'it is an opportunity for these young girls who came to France and who are also coaches in Iraq to be accompanied [in their development]. This is a type of emancipation but also about sharing an experience.'³⁹ Ambassador Ducroquet played with the Iraqis during his first week on the job in 2023 on the same field where so many legendary French players trained, a symbol.

'You could see that it was a very special moment for those young girls to be in Paris with joy and happiness training together with a lot of dedication. That was really striking. What you feel in those moments is how powerful sports can be and can change lives.'

On-pitch success was not the main metric of 'success' for the initiative, although it was important for Iraq to be back in the game of international women's competition. It will take time for this sports diplomacy program to yield sporting returns. But according to Alarass, there are already improvements. 'Now, at least the [Iraqi] players have knowledge how to play,' he said and acknowledged how the larger emphasis on training up the Iraqi women's football ecosystem will help strengthen and sustain development. He was hopeful that within three or six years the Lionesses' physical and tactical game would improve, part of the larger case for investment from a sporting standpoint.

But there were also clear diplomacy-related returns, too. Changing lives, changing perceptions, creating fresh representations of what women can do (in line with one of French diplomacy's goals to promote gender equality), creating new understandings and more opportunities were the focal points. For Alarass, 'everything is changed in women's football because the dreams of all the players is to come to Paris,'

'Within the three groups that went to Paris, all of them see what the mentality here

39 *Le Sport, Vecteur d'émancipation Des Femmes*, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnkvqzQlgzk>.

in France is like; some of the players went to Spain before, some of players went to United States before. So, of course they collect all these experiences and really, they are changed in their mindset.⁴⁰

For translator Alkhiro, the promise of football diplomacy to bridge divides was an attractive one. After all, he noted, soft power diplomacy was used after Iraq's opening to the world in 2003. 'It played a big role in changing our mind about how we see the "other," because we were acculturated in our schools, in our universities, that the 'other' were always our enemies,' he explained. At the time, cultural exchanges were used to help change attitudes, so that Iraqis understood that they could befriend foreigners for they were not the enemy. 'We depend on other soft tools such as sport, the arts, and other things that shape modern life and modern development,' Alkhiro said.

Women's sport could be one tool in that toolbox, especially as Iraqi attitudes towards sports begin to change. 'Sports are leisure ... to wear a sports team uniform, that identifier, it's new for us,' Alkhiro explained. As a result, social attitudes about women who play sports were beginning to change, he noted.

'In our country, we suffered from the patriarchy because our tradition in Iraq didn't allow girls to go out wearing shorts. But we have forced and challenged ourselves to change this vision. It's happened. People now [are] more [for it] than against it. Now, every family wants their daughter to play soccer.'

The Internet, social media, and the images they relayed of more open societies elsewhere played a role in this change, according to Alkhiro. Other factors included digital storytelling about women's professional football leagues and FIFA World Cups. 'Every girl dreams of being like these professional players,' Alarass said, who noted that the ability of earning a livelihood from playing professionally, no matter for how little money, was also an inducement.

New-found self-confidence and self-esteem on and off the pitch were byproducts of the program and of being part of the new generation of female Iraqi footballers trained by the French. 'Everyone knows that France was the World Cup Champions,' Alarass noted of how being aligned with one of the top federations in the world made Iraqis take note.

'Everybody was interested [in the project], especially the IFA. And not just talking about football. It's the change of mindsets for dealing with women's football, and dealing with the people in Iraq among each other, especially regarding sport. Especially after this project [with the FFF] started, everything has changed. Even the IFA, it's different now. They're interested in women's football more than before.'⁴¹

It also closed the gap between Iraq and the wider world. As Alkhiro noted of participants, 'they can use this thing to discover the two cultures, to exchange, to change some of our thoughts that are not compatible with modernity.' Moreover, the international experience gained from the FFF's Iraq project creates new potential careers for participants, from coaching and refereeing to international relations. In short, the program is also an incentive to other

40 Thaer Kadhim Alarass, Interview with the author, February 1, 2024.

41 Alarass, interview.

professional career opportunities beyond being a player.⁴²

One of the biggest challenges to this sports diplomacy prototype was to make it sustainable. That stems from funding, but also resources and, to a certain extent, branding. The FFF-IFA project is not an assistance program but instead one built to develop human capacity. That's an important distinction for Ambassador Ducroquet, for oftentimes sports diplomacy can get confused with sport for development and peace (even as there is common ground between the two). 'The project is not only about giving a few dozen girls the best training they can have in their life for two weeks or several months,' he said. 'It is also learning how to build a women's national football team, how to be coached by proper coaches, and how to manage sports infrastructure.' It is effectively building sports competency and knowledge, diplomacy in service of sports even as the sporting world, in this case, football, also worked in service of French diplomacy.

4. CONCLUSION

The FFF's women's football diplomacy initiative with Iraq empowers the sports world and those it serves—in this case, Iraqis. This example shows how diplomacy can work in service of sport, and sport in service of diplomacy as an example of bilateral football diplomacy driven by non-state sports actors in partnership with a state. It illustrates the potential of cultural engagement through sport and how football diplomacy can help change minds, in this case, those of participants, their families, French football technicians and others.

The ability of sports diplomacy to level-up sporting skill sets, in this case, tactical and technical football *savoir faire* strengthens its value. Oftentimes the importance of technical and knowledge exchange is overlooked, yet such upskilling can bolster sporting abilities. Improved sporting capabilities and capacities can translate in some instances to better sporting results, whether at the local, regional, national, and/or international level. Accumulating "wins" on the pitch can reinforce self-confidence, including those of nations within the realm of international affairs. The bragging rights that come through football victories know no bounds.

Lastly, the FFF's women's football diplomacy initiative with Iraq articulates how it can prod people to rethink their own contributions to the sports world. For Alkhiro, being part of the project helped to redefine how he views himself, which is increasingly as a type of sports diplomat who helps to facilitate the communication, representation, and negotiation between his players and their hosts. 'Day by day, I think that I could help the girls,' he said, of how he received requests to teach them French and English so that they could express their thoughts and ideas to those they met.

42 Ducroquet, Interview with the author.

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