



## PSYCHOLOGY PRESSURES AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO DECISION-MAKING AMONG INTERNATIONAL FOOTBALL REFEREES IN IRAQ

**Ahmed Jalal Ibrahim**

University of Kirkuk  
IRAQ

**Emad Abbas Hussein**

University of Kirkuk  
IRAQ

**Saleh Nayef Abdulhalim**

University of Kirkuk  
IRAQ

Corresponding Author: [ahmedjalal@uokirkuk.edu.iq](mailto:ahmedjalal@uokirkuk.edu.iq)

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### ABSTRACT

**Background.** Psychological pressure is an inherent characteristic of human performance in situations demanding rapid response and accurate judgment, particularly in the complex and multifaceted world of sports. Research Problem refereeing football is a sporting task that demands a high level of focus, accuracy, and emotional stability, given nature of refereeing decisions, which are made quickly and under influence of numerous factors. These factors include psychological pressures stemming from importance of matches, behavior of players and coaching staff, fan reactions, and constant media scrutiny. **Objectives.** This research aims to identify level of psychological stress and decision-making skills among international football referees in Iraq, and to reveal nature of relationship between them in light of realities of refereeing in field. **Method.** The researcher used a descriptive correlational approach, and the research population consisted of 20 officially accredited international referees with Iraqi Football Association during 2025–2026 sports season, selected purposively at a rate of 100%. A 30-item stress scale and a 26-item decision-making scale were used, after their validity and reliability were verified using appropriate scientific methods. **Results.** Results showed that referees' stress levels were relatively high, while their decision-making abilities were very good. Results also revealed a statistically significant inverse correlation between stress and decision-making, indicating that increased stress leads to a relative decrease in the efficiency of refereeing decisions. **Conclusion.** International football referees in Iraq suffer from a relatively high level of psychological pressure. The referees have a good level of decision-making. There is a statistically significant inverse correlation between psychological stress and decision-making. Psychological pressures negatively affect speed and accuracy of refereeing decisions during matches.

**Keywords;** psychological pressures, decision-making, international referees, football.



## A. INTRODUCTION

Psychological pressure is an inherent characteristic of human performance in situations demanding rapid response and accurate judgment, particularly in the complex and multifaceted world of sports (Junior et al., 2021; Richlan et al., 2023). Refereeing in football stands out as one of the most pressure-sensitive sports activities, given the need for immediate decisions made within a limited timeframe and under constant public and media scrutiny (Sulaiman et al., 2025).

Football enjoys widespread social and popular support in Iraq, which amplifies the responsibility placed on referees, especially international referees who are tasked with officiating highly competitive matches, in addition to representing Iraqi refereeing in official competitions. Referees often find themselves in complex psychological situations due to frequent objections from players and coaching staff, as well as the reactions of fans and media analysis after matches, all of which can affect their mental stability and the effectiveness of their refereeing decisions (Al-Nasrawi & Sheila, 2022; Mohamed, 2025).

Sports psychologists emphasize that psychological pressure is not necessarily negative; it can contribute to improved performance when within normal limits. However, exceeding these limits leads to adverse effects such as tension, poor concentration, and hesitation factors closely linked to decision-making (Sulaiman et al., 2025). Decision-making is a higher-order cognitive process that is influenced by an individual's psychological state, particularly in fast-paced and time-constrained situations.

Despite the progress Iraqi referees have made in physical and technical aspects in recent years, psychological dimension still requires in-depth field studies, particularly concerning psychological pressures and their relationship to decision-making among international referees. Therefore, this research aims to shed light on this relationship, contributing to a scientific foundation that can be utilized in psychological preparation programs and the development of refereeing performance.

Importance of this research stems from its examination of a psychological aspect that influences refereeing performance: psychological pressures and their relationship to decision-making among international football referees in Iraq. Decision-making plays a crucial role in achieving sporting fairness and ensuring the smooth conduct of matches. Furthermore, this research contributes to the body of scientific literature by providing a field study focusing on international referees, a group that has not received sufficient attention in local research (Arsil et al., 2024; Hardinata, Yosika, et al., 2023; Suryadi, Yanti, et al., 2023). Practical importance of the research lies in the possibility of using its results in preparing training and guidance programs aimed at developing the psychological aspect of referees, which helps them to deal with different pressures and improve the quality of refereeing decisions, which will positively affect the level of refereeing and the development of football in Iraq.

Research Problem refereeing football is a sporting task that demands a high level of focus, accuracy, and emotional stability, given nature of refereeing decisions, which are made quickly and under influence of numerous factors. These factors include psychological pressures stemming from importance of matches, behavior of players and coaching staff, fan reactions, and constant media scrutiny. These pressures are even more intense for

international referees, who bear responsibility of representing Iraqi refereeing in official competitions. Relative improvement in physical and technical skills of Iraqi football referees, reality on ground reveals a disparity in accuracy and consistency of refereeing decisions, particularly in highly competitive matches (Hardinata, B, et al., 2023; Suryadi, Suganda, et al., 2023; Yudi et al., 2024). This disparity is often attributed to psychological pressures referees face while officiating matches, which can affect their ability to make sound decisions at right time, research problem is defined by following question: Is there a statistically significant relationship between level of psychological stress and decision-making among international football referees in Iraq?

Research objectives are to identifying level of psychological stress among international football referees in Iraq. Identifying level of decision-making among international football referees in Iraq. Uncovering nature of relationship between psychological pressures and decision-making among international referees. Determining impact of psychological stress levels on accuracy and speed of decision-making during match management.

Research hypotheses there are relationship correlation indication statistics when Level (0.05) between level pressures psychology and level taking decision among international football referees in Iraq. There are relationship correlation indication statistics between level pressures psychology and speed taking decision. There are relationship correlation indication statistics between level pressures psychology accuracy taking decision. There are relationship correlation indication statistics between level pressures psychology trust by decision. There are relationship correlation indication statistics between level pressures psychology and taking decision under.

## **B. METHOD**

The researchers adopted descriptive approach with a correlational style, as it is the most suitable for studying relationships between psychological variables without interfering to control or regulate them. This approach aims to describe level of psychological stress and level of decision-making among international football referees, and to reveal nature of relationship between them in field reality. The descriptive correlational approach is one of common approaches in sports psychology research because it provides accuracy in analyzing psychological phenomena related to sports and refereeing performance (Hassanein, 2001; Alawi, 2010).

The research community consists of (20) international football referees in Iraq who are accredited by Iraqi Football Association and registered in official FIFA lists during sports season 2024-2025. The research sample was selected in a purposive purposeful manner, as it is appropriate to nature of limited research community. Sample included a number of 20 international judges, representing 100% of total research community. Selection of sample took into account availability of international refereeing experience and continuity in managing official matches, which confirms that sample adequately represents research community.

### *Research tools*

1. Psychological stress scale: The researchers used psychological stress scale in sports field prepared by Osama Kamel Rateb (2004), which is one of scales commonly used in Arabic

studies. The scale consists of 30 items that measure multiple sources of psychological stress competitive stress, crowd stress, emotional stress, and is answered according to five-point Likert scale. This scale has been used in a number of Arab studies, and has proven to be highly effective in measuring psychological stress among athletes and referees (Rateb, 2004; Jaber, 2015). Justification for choice: its suitability to Arab environment and nature of arbitration work, and ease of its regulation for category of referees.

2. Decision-making scale: The researchers used decision-making scale in sports field, which is adopted in sports psychology studies and is based on foundations of psychometric measurement of higher mental abilities, consisting of 26 items, as indicated by Alawi (2010) and Weinberg & Gould (2019). The scale measures ability to judge speed of decision-making, accuracy of decision, Confidence in decision-making under pressure. It consists of a specified item, and is answered according to a five-point Likert scale. Justification for choice: decision-making process is directly linked to arbitration performance, and this type of metric is adopted in modern arbitration studies (Hancock & Ste-Marie, 2013).

*validity of research tools*

Validity of research instruments was verified using the following methods:

1. Apparent validity: By presenting two scales to a group of experts specializing in sports psychology, refereeing and football, to ensure soundness of wording and suitability of items to the research objectives (Hassanein, 2001).
2. Internal consistency validity: by calculating correlation coefficients between score of each item and total score of scale, which is a method adopted in psychological research (Alawi, 2010).

*Reliability of research instruments*

The reliability of two scales was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, to measure internal consistency of the items. This method is one of the most common methods in psychological and mathematical studies. Reliability value was (0.91), which is an acceptable value for purposes of scientific research (Rateb, 2004).

Validity of instruments was verified through apparent validity and internal consistency validity. Reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, and its value was (0.91) for psychological stress scale and (0.89) for decision-making scale, which are high values indicating that instruments have a high degree of reliability.

**Table 1.** Coefficient consistency (Cronbach's Alpha) for scales

Scale	Number of paragraphs	Cronbach's alpha coefficient	Stability level
Psychological pressures	30	0.91	High
Decision making	26	0.89	High

Table (1) Shows results that standard pressures psychology and decision making enjoy degree High from steadfastness, where it reached values coefficient Cronbach Alpha (0.91) and (0.89) on in succession, It is values superiority limit accepted scientifically (0.70).

This reflects that consistency internally high paragraphs measurements, which confirms validity for use in research scientific and strengthens trust results extracted.

*Pilot Experiment*

A pilot study was conducted on a sample of (4) referees from outside main sample, with aim of ensure that the items in both scales are clear. determine time required to answer. identifying potential difficulties during application.

*Field Procedures*

The research procedures included following obtaining official approvals from relevant authorities. Applying research tools to study sample in specified locations. Collect forms and ensure that they are complete and valid for statistical analysis.

*Statistical Methods*

**A. RESULTS**

Results of psychological stress scale

**Table 2.** Mean and standard deviation of psychological stress scale among international referees (n = 20)

Variable	Sample number	Mean	Standard deviation	Hypothetical mean	Sig. level	Stress level
Psychological pressures	20	63.20	17.92	60	0.03	Relatively high

Table (2) appears that mean of Psychology pressures scale reached (63.20), it is higher from hypothetical mean for scale (60), as that value level Significance (Sig. = 0.03) is less from level Significance Approved (0.05), Which it indicates to presence difference statistically in favor of mean. It indicates on that international Iraqi football referees. They are exposed to level high relatively from Psychological pressures.

It is attributed that to nature the job arbitration that it is characterized quickly events, and sensitivity decisions, and abundance pressures of fans and media personality, addition to responsible acting arbitration Iraqi in competitions official, that is what agree with Vargas et al. (2025) noted that refereeing is one of the most stressful roles due to speed of decision-making, fear of making mistakes, objections from players and coaches, pressure from public and media, and constant evaluation of referee. A recent review indicates that pressures on referees stem from situational, organizational, and communicative factors within match, and that managing these pressures is crucial for maintaining performance and accuracy. Studies have also shown that stress and anxiety can affect attention and information processing speed during refereeing decisions (Zhang et al., 2024). Alawi (2010) and Rateb (2004).

**Table 3.** Mean and Standard deviation and Significance level of decision making scale among Iraqi international referees

Variable	Sample number	Mean	Standard deviation	Hypothetical mean	Sig. level	Stress level
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Decision making	20	113.52	30.31	78	0.01	Very good
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Table (3) shows that mean of Psychology pressures scale reached (113.52), it is higher from hypothetical mean of scale (78), with presence difference statistically when level Significance (0.01). It indicates this is high result to that International referees who enjoy at level very good in refereeing decision making. It is attributed that to what owns it referees from expertise International refereeing, addition to courses training continuous that contributes in development abilities mentality cognitive related quickly accuracy of decision making, it is what agree with Weinberg & Gould (2019) and Hassanin (2001), as Mac Mahon & Plessner (2021) explained, show that experienced referees demonstrate a clear superiority in interpreting ambiguous situations and making accurate decisions compared to non-experts, as a result of accumulation of cognitive patterns. Renden et al. (2020) also showed that repeated exposure to high-intensity game scenarios improves efficiency of visual-cognitive processing, which is directly reflected in quality of refereeing decision.

**Table 4.** Coefficient correlation Pearson (r) and significance level between psychology pressures and decision making among international referees

Variable	Correlation coefficient (r)	Significance level	Nature of relationship
Psychological pressures VS decision-making	-0.59	0.02	Inverse Sig.

The results in table (4) indicate a moderately strong negative correlation with statistical significance between psychological stress and decision-making, where value of Pearson’s correlation coefficient ( $r = -0.59$ ) reached a significance level of (Sig. = 0.02). This means that higher levels of psychological stress are associated with lower decision-making efficiency. In simpler terms, the greater psychological pressure on a referee, the weaker their ability to make right decision in refereeing situations. This relationship is moderately strong, giving it clear practical significance in field of refereeing, and not merely a numerical indicator.

This finding aligns with study by Zhang et al. (2024), which demonstrated that anxiety and psychological stress lead to attention deficits and reduced cognitive processing efficiency, directly impacting accuracy of referees' decisions during matches. Study also confirmed that high levels of stress diminish a referee's ability to quickly analyze a situation and make appropriate decisions in a short timeframe. This result is consistent with study by Pizzera et al. (2022), which showed that psychological stress especially when combined with physical fatigue leads to a significant decrease in quality of refereeing decisions and an increased likelihood of hesitation or error, even among experienced referees.

Results of this table support modern scientific trend that considers refereeing decisions to be influenced not only by knowledge of law and experience, but also by referee's psychological state. This underscores need to introduce stress management programs and decision-making training under conditions similar to actual matches, with aim of maintaining performance levels and minimizing impact of negative psychological factors.

This result means that an increase in level of psychological stress among international referees leads to a relative decrease in efficiency of refereeing decision-making, which is consistent with theory of Lazarus (2000) which confirms that high psychological stress negatively affects higher cognitive processes such as attention, concentration and response speed, and is also consistent with study of Hancock & Ste-Marie (2013).

## **B. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

International football referees in Iraq suffer from a relatively high level of psychological pressure. The referees have a good level of decision-making. There is a statistically significant inverse correlation between psychological stress and decision-making. Psychological pressures negatively affect speed and accuracy of refereeing decisions during matches. Need to adopt psychological preparation programs for international referees within the plans of Iraqi Football Association. Involve specialists in sports psychology in referee courses. Training referees in emotional control skills and decision-making under pressure. Reducing biased media pressure on referees.

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## **D. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT**

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