

For Immediate Release



AUB professor publishes study on the politicization of sports in Lebanon

Beirut, Lebanon- 11/04/2011 - *Third World Quarterly (TWQ)*, the Routledge-published leading journal of scholarship and policy in the field of international studies, has published an article by Danyel Reiche, assistant professor for comparative politics at AUB, in its Volume Number 32.

The article is entitled: "War Minus the Shooting? The politics of sport in Lebanon as a unique case in comparative politics". It is summarized below:

The power of sport to reduce tensions within societies and to unite people is well known, with South Africa being often cited as an example. However, the sports sector in Lebanon is used to divide Lebanese society and not to unite it.

Almost all professional sports clubs have clear sectarian and political affiliations and most prominent Lebanese sects have professional clubs in the first basketball and football leagues. Most clubs have sectarian affiliations with the three largest religious communities in Lebanon- Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim and Maronite Christian.

Confessionalism, the political system of this 'mosaic state' with 18 state-registered sects, produces conditions that only allow for competition within sects. The sport sector, especially the professional men's teams in football and basketball, serves as a tool for competition within and between sects. In a middle-income country with only four million inhabitants, club revenues from ticketing and broadcasting are almost non-existent. Therefore professional sport teams are completely dependent on sponsors. Within a patron-client relationship system, political leaders finance the clubs but expect complete loyalty from the teams, implemented through such practices as choosing their party colours as team colours or posting large pictures of themselves in the arenas.

Until 2005, the main rivalries in football and basketball were between Muslims vs Christians. Since February 2005, with the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, Lebanese politics have split into two blocs: March 8 (lead by Shia Muslim party Hezbollah) and March 14 (lead by the Sunni Muslim Future Movement). The proxy conflicts between the two blocs take place in men's basketball and football. The main female basketball and football clubs do have sectarian, but not necessarily political, affiliations.

Of the total Lebanese population, 94.5 per cent belong to one of the six largest sects: Sunni Muslim, Shia Muslim, Maronite Christian, Greek Orthodox, Druze, and Greek Catholic. Lebanon's 18 state-recognised religious sects have two main functions: the responsibility for personal-status affairs; and access to the main political positions, which are allocated proportionally among them.

When it comes to the allocation of political positions, the foundational model since Lebanon's independence in 1943 has been the National Pact, with its confessional formula. According to the formula the office of the president is reserved for a Maronite Christian, the Sunnis are accorded the premiership and the Shia the speaker of parliament. The Taif Accord of September 1989 and the Doha Agreement of May 2008 introduced changes but further strengthened the sects and their role as states within a state. This meant that 'often political competition was intrasectarian rather than with members of different groups'.

There is no other field with as much direct confrontation among the different sectarian and political groups as in sport. Sport in Lebanon can be described using a quotation from George Orwell: it is 'war minus the shooting'.

After violent clashes between supporters, the government banned fans from attending football matches. The ban was lifted in early 2010, but stadiums were still almost empty, and sport teams are no longer receiving as much revenue from TV stations. The ban made the teams even more dependent on their political patrons. In the Lebanese sectarian environment, sponsoring professional sports teams can be a risky business for multinational companies, making it even more difficult for them to reach certain communities with their products. This brings patrons into a powerful position.

Since all Lebanese professional (men's) sports teams have a strong sectarian identity, theoretically the national teams could have the potential to contribute to building a common Lebanese identity.

The Lebanese national football team is not very successful, so the best candidate for uniting the Lebanese people is the national basketball team. It is among the leading teams in Asia. The problem is that, even at the level of the national teams, there exists a good deal of sectarian interference.

Lebanon still has a long way to go to transform itself from a sectarian to a secular state. But there is at least a first sign of promise. Since February 2009 citizens have been able to remove their religious affiliation from their registry records. There are also some signs of hope in the world of sport with NGO that are now promoting sport as a vehicle for social change and for peace.

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Note to Editors

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Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of more than 7,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It

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