

INTRODUCTION

FROM SPORTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST TO MIDDLE EASTERN SPORTS

Tamir Sorek and Danyel Reiche

Sports in the Middle East have become a major issue in global affairs: Qatar's successful bid for the FIFA World Cup 2022 (won in a final vote against the United States), the 2005 UEFA Champions League Final in Turkey's most populous city Istanbul, the European basketball championship EuroBasket in 2017 in Israel, and other major sporting events, such as the annually staged Formula 1 races in Bahrain and Abu Dhabi, have put an international spotlight on the region. In particular, media around the world are discussing the question of whether the most prestigious sporting events should be staged in a predominantly authoritarian, socially conservative, and politically contentious part of the world.¹ The influence of sports in the Middle East extends beyond the region: professional sports clubs around the world have signed sponsorship deals with Middle Eastern airlines, and stadium-naming rights have also been signed with those companies. Major football clubs like Paris Saint-Germain Football Club and Manchester City have been bought by investors from the Gulf–Qatar and Abu Dhabi, respectively.

The growing visibility of Middle Eastern sports has only recently attracted the attention of scholars. Although some sporadic academic studies appeared

as early as the 1980s, we can identify the beginning of a 'wave' of scholarship in the mid-1990s, which intensified in the early 2000s. These studies were mostly socio-historical, sociological, and anthropological, and they tended to focus on the particular dynamics of certain countries, including Egypt,² Turkey,³ Iran,⁴ Yemen,⁵ Israel/Palestine,⁶ and Jordan.⁷ While more recent scholarship continues similar patterns, and extends to cover new countries,⁸ since 2010 we may also identify the addition of two new trends. The first is related to the power shift in international sports towards Middle Eastern countries, with the awarding of mega-sporting events to countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. As a result, in the 2010s more scholarship appears to be focused on business, management, and policy.⁹ The second trend is the contextualization of various case studies related to specific countries within a broader regional frame. Numerous volumes on sports in the Arab world, Middle East, or MENA (the Middle East and North Africa),¹⁰ and particularly about soccer,¹¹ have been published since 2012. This volume is part of both emerging trends, but with its own particular characteristics.

First, following Abbas Amanat's question, 'Is there a Middle East?',¹² we ask 'is there a Middle Eastern sport?' In other words, beyond the aggregation of case studies, can we identify common regional dynamics typical for the Middle East? This volume, therefore, emphasizes the interdependence between regional patterns and local developments in particular countries. For example, chapters in this volume identify common patterns in the historical developments of Middle Eastern sports, illustrate the common experience of Muslim female athletes throughout the region, analyze the diverse effects of regional mega-sporting events on Lebanon, and outline common trends in the sport business in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member states. Second, the contributors to this volume share a common understanding of Middle Eastern sports as a contested terrain, where struggles over resources, meanings, and identities are constantly taking place, and there is no inevitable outcome for these struggles. We demonstrate the role sports play in the battle over social memories related to the Palestinian-Bedouin divide in Jordan, or over competing definitions of 'Israeliness' among Israelis with different approaches to religion, as well as different ethnic and class backgrounds. In Lebanon, mega-sporting events have been playing an indirect role in struggles over the definition of Lebanese national identity, as well as the degree to which this identity is embedded in the broader Arab world.

These struggles are also related to the various roles sports can play in societal change in the Middle East. While a major goal of policies aimed at pro-

moting sports in the Middle East is international recognition,¹³ to what extent can sports also contribute to changes within the region? In most Middle Eastern countries sports participation is much lower compared to that in other regions of the world, which has had severe consequences on the health of the population, with obesity becoming a major problem, particularly in the Arabian Peninsula. Does the interest in hosting mega-sporting events, and using sports as a promotional tool, also lead to improved promotion of sports at the grassroots level? Since sports in the Middle East has traditionally been considered a masculine sphere,¹⁴ are women in sports gaining acceptance? And are sports such as football, which are considered to be masculine arenas, becoming more popular and accepted among girls and their families?

The Middle East is not a homogeneous group of countries: there is political stability in some countries while others are facing civil wars. Most Middle Eastern countries are Muslim-majority countries, but some also have large Christian populations, as well as other religious minority groups. Arabic is the most widely spoken language in the Middle East, but there are also other languages spoken, such as Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, and Hebrew. What most Middle Eastern countries have in common is their colonial legacy and complicated present-day relations with the West. In addition, most of them share a low ranking on indexes tracking gender equality, as well as on those tracking democracy and press freedom.¹⁵ Can mega-sporting events awarded to Middle Eastern countries contribute to societal reform, and can they positively affect, for example, freedom of expression? While such a scenario is possible, this volume rejects the romantic and deterministic idea that sport always contributes to societal improvement. Nonetheless, it does highlight specific case studies where this is indeed the case, for instance the empowerment of women in particular circumstances and under particular conditions.

As this book shows, the state assumes different roles in various Middle Eastern sports sectors. In wealthy Middle Eastern countries such as Qatar, and in emerging market countries such as Turkey, the state plays a central role in the sports sector. A challenge discussed in the volume is how the private sector must grow to assist governments in meeting the ambitious visions and targets for sports. For states such as Lebanon with weak—and some might even argue, failing—governments, the challenge is different: to fight corruption around mega-sporting events, especially regarding the allocation of sports budgets. They also need to develop a more strategic approach that gives some guidance to stakeholders in order to meet targets such as increased sports participation and elite sport success.

This book is the product of a research initiative conducted by the Center for International and Regional Studies (CIRS) at Georgetown University in Qatar. In 2017, CIRS invited the contributors to this book as well as other experts in the field to attend two working group meetings in Doha focused on 'Sport, Society, and the State in the Middle East.' All participants contributed to the review process and provided feedback on the drafts of this edited volume. The final group of contributors was carefully selected, and includes some of the most renowned experts in the field. The selected contributions cover a broad range of Middle Eastern countries, although some nations are more in focus than others. Two chapters (Lysa and LaMay) entirely, and another chapter partly (Chadwick), focus on Qatar, largely because of the growing international interest in the country ahead of the 2022 FIFA World Cup, but also because Doha hosts multiple international universities and is relatively easy to access for most researchers from all over the world to conduct their studies. Similarly, there are two contributions focusing on sports in Lebanon (Nassif and Reiche), a country with both strong academic and sporting traditions.

Although great effort was made to identify scholars working on all major Middle Eastern countries, and to include them in the two working group meetings that ultimately led to this edited volume, not all countries could be included. For example, there is no chapter in the volume that deals exclusively with Egypt or Iran. However, Murat Yıldız's chapter provides an overarching regional history of sport, and dedicates extensive attention to these two countries.

The volume is thoroughly interdisciplinary, and integrates different academic disciplines from the humanities and social sciences, including business, cultural studies, communication, history, journalism, sociology, sports management, and political science. The ten chapters of this book offer original, in-depth, theoretically grounded, and richly empirical chapters. The contributions rely on diverse research methodologies, ranging from ethnographic work, surveys, and in-depth interviews to reviews of government files and the growing body of academic literature and media articles on sports in the Middle East.

The first part of the book (chapters 1 to 5) considers sport a contested terrain, where various struggles over meaning, resources, and rights, are fought. The book begins with a historical overview. Some popular discussions give the impression that sport is something new to the Middle East, or that it is no more than a Western import. Competitive organized physical activities, however, have been known in the region for centuries, long before

the Western colonial enterprise.¹⁶ Still, it is true that the codified and standardized versions of modern global sports as we know them today were imported to the Middle East in the late nineteenth century—soon after their codification in Western countries.

The representation of modern sport as a ‘Western’ institution is the origin of the first tension we discuss. In the opening chapter, Murat Yıldız traces the activities of educators, government officials, sports club administrators, students, club members, editors, and columnists who helped turn sports into a regular fixture of the urban landscape of cities across the Middle East. Furthermore, these actors frequently saw themselves as agents of Western modernity, and, in this capacity, they aspired to turn the physical activity from ‘fun’ into a broader project of training, disciplining, and educating the self. His chapter highlights the tension between these two interpretive poles, and how it is related to the construction of the West vs. East dichotomy. Yıldız’s chapter is also a response to the rapidly growing study of the history of sports in various Middle Eastern countries, and questions whether we can talk about a shared and distinct history of sports in the Middle East. Based on press research and integration of secondary sources, the chapter traces the emergence and spread of team sports and physical exercise throughout the urban centers of the Middle East from the late nineteenth century until the 1930s, and demonstrates that there were important shared discursive and institutional features across the region. The chapter shows that the tension between sports as fun and sports as a disciplinary tool is by itself an important characteristic of Middle Eastern sporting history.

The next two chapters deal with struggles over the definition of collective identities. Dag Tuastad analyzes football’s role in how societies remember. Based on several phases of ethnographic work over two decades, the chapter demonstrates how football constitutes a dominant arena for battles over national social memories related to the Palestinian–Bedouin divide in Jordan. Social memory processes in football arenas represent two related social phenomena. First, collective historical memories are produced. Second, during football matches, with their symbolic and physical confrontations, these collective memories are also enacted and embodied. Palestinian–Jordanian encounters on the football field have been especially important in this context, and have served as a stage for reprocessing and embodying the memory of the 1970 civil war. For Palestinians, as a stateless ethno-national group that lacks the formal national institutions to preserve a national past in the form of museums or archaeological preservation, football, and particularly the *Wihdat*

team, has become an important alternative. While until the early 1990s the fans' chants emphasized identification with the armed struggle, today the dominant themes are Palestinian common descent, unity, and refugee identity. At the same time, the team's alter ego, FC Faisali, has served as a focus of East Bank Jordanian nationalism, emphasizing tribal roots and values, Islamic tradition, Hashemite loyalty, and the tribal roots of the monarchy.

Similarly, in chapter 3, Tamir Sorek analyzes sport as a sphere of struggle over Israeli collective identity. The chapter combines analysis of the rhetoric of Hapoel Tel Aviv hardcore football and basketball fans with a quantitative demographic examination of the wide circle of sympathizers of various teams. The bifocal examination reveals that the stadium rhetoric is actually an expression of fundamental struggles between competing definitions of Israeliness. The rhetoric of Hapoel fans is an uncommon combination in Israeli sports: socialism, anti-nationalism, anti-racism, but it also includes violent, sexist, classist, and Germanophobic content. In addition, hardcore Hapoel fans make provocative use of Holocaust terminology. This rhetoric is partly related to the demographic basis of both the hardcore fans and the wider circle of sympathizers who tend to be more middle class and significantly more secular than the fans of other teams. The chapter argues that the transgressive rhetoric of Hapoel fans is partly related to the decline in the political power of the secular elite in Israel. The insights are based on an online survey, and studying websites and forums of Hapoel Tel Aviv fans, fan songs available on YouTube, and phone and Skype interviews with fans.

From struggles over meanings and symbols, the next two chapters take us to struggles over inclusion of women. In chapter 4, Charlotte Lysa discusses how Qatari female footballers negotiate gendered expectations in football. On the one hand, these players are being encouraged by government policies, in accordance with pressure from international organizations, to pursue sports careers. On the other hand, these women are subject to a conservative culture, upheld by specific societal and family values, in which it is largely unacceptable for a woman to play football. This tension has driven some Qatari women to create a safe space for their activities by initiating university teams, allowing them to bypass established norms regarding women and femininity. Based on interviews with young women engaged in football activities, this chapter shows that these spaces do not carry the same negative connotations of masculinity that the official clubs and the national team do, thus allowing women to challenge the perception that it is not possible for a female to play football, while at the same time preserving their femininity and adhering to societal

moral codes. By relabeling women's football as a university activity, rather than something that conflicts with their academic priorities, they are able to play football without getting into conflict with their families. The women seek to gain a positive freedom to pursue their objectives and to reclaim control over shaping their own lives.

While Lysa examines the tensions between athletic aspirations and social norms on the field, in chapter 5, Nida Ahmad investigates them in the virtual sphere. Social media creates unique opportunities for sportswomen to engage in a form of self-branding by sharing aspects of their lives online, but the study of this phenomenon has so far been limited to the Western context. The chapter presents the findings from a digital ethnography of the social media accounts of sportswomen from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iran, as well as semi-structured interviews with these women. In contrast to research findings that show Western sportswomen using social media for self-branding and their tendency to offer intimate details of their lifestyles, Ahmad shows that Middle Eastern sportswomen carefully consider what and how they share with their audiences, applying different strategies to safely and effectively navigate the digital terrain. Family and cultural constraints are central to their digital decision-making.

In chapter 6, Craig LaMay takes us to another sociopolitical conflict, as he elaborates on the effects of the 2022 FIFA World Cup on Qatar's restrictive media system. How does the World Cup affect rights of expression and publication in a country that criminalizes, for example, blasphemy and criticism of the emir? The analysis is based on the author's conversations with newspaper editors in the country, assessing internationally known indices of press freedom, and the growing body of academic literature on Qatari sport and media politics. Being home to broadcaster Al Jazeera, Qatar is the most progressive member of the GCC in matters of free expression, but ranks low on international indicators. Qatar's successful bid for the 2022 World Cup has brought the country both new attention and criticism, with the latter focusing especially on the *kafala* labor system. Neither China nor Russia's media regimes changed after hosting the Olympics in 2008 and 2014 respectively, but the chapter argues that Qatar has been relatively open to its critics, and the award of the World Cup has advanced conversations in the country about sensitive subjects. To be recognized as a modern and influential state, LaMay predicts that Qatar will liberalize its media environment, but on its own terms, which might deviate from Western standards.

The next three chapters deal with other aspects of Middle Eastern sports politics. In chapter 7, Cem Tınaz examines Turkish sports policy with empha-

sis on the period since 2002 when the tenure of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government began. Based on in-depth interviews with former Turkish sport ministers and other sport authorities, as well as a review of academic literature, government files, and press articles, the chapter concludes that a main focus of Turkish sports policy is on gaining domestic and international prestige rather than on increasing sports participation. While Turkey was five times unsuccessful in its bids for the Olympic Games in 2000, 2004, 2008, 2012, and 2020, it has had several other accomplishments, including hosting other high-profile international sporting events such as the 2005 UEFA Champions League Final and constructing football stadiums. The country also gained elite sport success at international championships and the Olympic Games, with the naturalization of foreign-born athletes a main driver. The chapter stresses the central role of the state, and the sport sector's dependence on government subsidies, since most financial resources come from the sports betting company Iddaa. When it comes to the low sports participation in Turkey by international standards, Tinaz argues that the government has so far failed to properly integrate sports with the education system, making school sports one of the most problematic areas of sport development in Turkey.

Compared with other Middle Eastern countries, Turkey has been relatively successful in international sports. For example, the Turkish men's national soccer team finished third in the FIFA World Cup in 2002; the men's basketball national team finished second in the 2010 World Cup; and the country has won ninety-one Olympic medals in its history of participation (up until 2018). Lebanon, on the other hand, is located at the other end of the achievements scale. It has never qualified for the FIFA World Cup, and has only won four medals at the Olympic Games since it started participating in 1948. To date, the country's best achievement is coming sixteenth in the men's Basketball World Cup. This is far less than, for example, Estonia, Georgia, and Jamaica, which are countries with smaller populations and lower GDP than Lebanon. In chapter 8, Nadim Nassif asks why Lebanon is failing in international sport. The chapter argues that the promotion of elite sport has never been a priority for the Lebanese government. Nassif reviews the academic literature on elite sport success, and discusses political, economic, demographic, and cultural factors. It is argued that the meager annual budget allocated by the Lebanese government to the Ministry of Sport is a necessary but insufficient explanation for Lebanon's failure in international sport. The Ministry of Youth and Sport issued a 'Sport Strategy 2010–2020', but never

implemented the proposed policies. Beyond the government, there is the problem of the corruption that is prevalent in the national sport federations. Nassif highlights how administrators occupy key positions based on their political affiliations, rather than on their skills and capacities.

Danyel Reiche provides a different perspective on sports in Lebanon. In chapter 9, he engages with the scholarship that emphasizes the benefits of mega-sporting events to host countries, from increasing their international prestige and influence on global politics, through mobilizing national pride, to serving as a tool of economic development. Reiche investigates the benefits accrued to Lebanon as a result of hosting four regional mega-sporting events after the civil war ended in 1990. He examines the similarities and differences between these four events by examining, in particular, the tangible and intangible legacies. Apart from a review of academic and press articles, primary data were collected by interviewing key stakeholders in the Lebanese sports sector who were involved in the events. The chapter concludes that while the events provided the country with some short-term promotional benefits, they introduced a heavy financial burden, especially regarding stadium and sports hall construction. Resources to maintain those facilities became a source of corruption. The chapter suggests that, in the future, Lebanon should consider co-hosting mega-sporting events with other countries in order to limit the financial risks. It should also integrate legacy management programs into the event planning to avoid unused facilities after the events.

Finally, Simon Chadwick discusses sports as a business. He presents an overview of sports business in the six Gulf Cooperation Council states. GCC member states stage sporting mega-events and invest in global sports, for example, by acquiring football clubs. The shirt sponsorship and stadium naming-rights deals of the region's national airlines aim to create favorable perceptions of those companies and their nations, as well as to diversify economies beyond oil and gas. The chapter provides a statistical profile of sport in each GCC member state and shows that Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman are lagging far behind Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar in terms of sport industry size. Fluctuating oil prices, political tensions between GCC states, and weak attendances at games are serious threats to the future growth of the sport industry. Chadwick concludes that the private sector needs to seriously develop in order to replace the state as the industry's central focus.

In sum, this book brings together leading scholars of Middle Eastern sports to portray the complex social, political, cultural, and economic aspects of sports in the region. The common thread in this volume is that sports in the

Middle East are much more than an ‘interesting angle’ through which to popularize academic themes. They are themselves a major political and economic force that not only reflect but also shape both individuals’ lives and large-scale social processes. Sporting competitions gain immense visibility in the media, elicit high levels of emotion by producing drama, and hold great potential to shape dominant meanings, identities, discourses, and ideologies.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: FROM SPORTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST TO MIDDLE EASTERN SPORTS

1. See for example Omer Aziz and Murtaza Hussain, 'Qatar's Showcase of Shame', *New York Times*, 6 January 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/01/06/opinion/qatars-showcase-of-shame.html, last accessed 18 January 2019.
2. Di-Capua, Yoav, 'Sports, Society and Revolution: Egypt in the Early Nasserite Period', in *Rethinking Nasserism*, ed. Elie Podeh and Onn Winckler, Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004; Walseth, Kristin and Kari Fasting, 'Islam's View on Physical Activity and Sport: Egyptian Women Interpreting Islam', *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38, 1 (2003), pp. 45–60; Jacob, Wilson, *Working Out Egypt: Masculinity and Subject Formation between Colonial Modernity and Nationalism, 1870–1940*, New York: New York University Press, 2005.
3. Stokes, Martin, "'Strong as a Turk": Power, Performance and Representation in Turkish Wrestling', in *Sport, Identity, and Ethnicity*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy, Oxford: Berg, 1996; Kari Fasting and Gertrud Pfister, *Opportunities and Barriers for Women in Sport: Turkey*, Women of Diversity Productions, 1999; Cünayd Okay, 'The introduction, early development and historiography of soccer in Turkey: 1890–1914', *Soccer and Society* 3, 3 (2002), pp. 1–10.
4. Chehabi, Houchang E., 'A Political History of Football in Iran', *Iranian Studies* 35, 4 (2002), pp. 371–402; Marcus Gerhardt, 'Sport and Civil Society in Iran', in *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran*, ed. E. Hooglund, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002; Cyrus Schayegh, 'Sport, Health, and the Iranian Middle Class in the 1920s and 1930s', *Iranian Studies* 35, 4 (2002), pp. 1–30; Babak Fozooni, 'Religion, Politics, and Class: Conflict and Contestation in the Development of Football in Iran', *Soccer and Society* 5, 3 (2004), pp. 356–70.
5. Stevenson, Thomas and Abdul-Karim Alaug, 'Football in Yemen: Rituals of