

# War Minus the Shooting? The politics of sport in Lebanon as a unique case in comparative politics

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*ABSTRACT* In the literature on sport and politics the potential of sport to unite fragmented societies is emphasised. Lebanon is a counter example. Sport does not unite but further divides people. 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. While national sports teams often have the potential to unite societies, in Lebanon this can only happen if first steps from a sectarian to a secular state are taken. Then a common national identity (including general support for the national sports teams) might gradually develop and later transform the confessional subsystems such as the media, schools and sports clubs towards non-sectarian entities.

In April 2010 a remarkable football match took place in Beirut. It was maybe the most unusual game ever played in the Lebanese capital. In the National Stadium Lebanese politicians, including Prime Minister Saad Hariri, played against each other to commemorate the 35th anniversary of the outbreak of the country's 1975–90 civil war.<sup>1</sup> In a political environment of deep divisions and tensions such a friendly match received a lot of attention at the domestic level (it was the cover story in all the Lebanese newspapers the next day)<sup>2</sup> as well as in foreign media.<sup>3</sup>

Politicians from all the parties met on the football pitch, both squads were mixed, with players from opposing political sides. The match took place under the motto 'We are one team'.

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The power of sport to reduce tensions within societies and to unite people is one of the main topics in the political and social science literature on sport. One of the studied cases is the example of South Africa, where the democratic elections in 1994 marked the final end of racial segregation in the country.<sup>4</sup> Since the fall of apartheid sport has served as a vehicle for reconciliation and increased social cohesion in the country. When the South African rugby team, a majority white team with only one black player, won the World Cup in 1995, 'the newly elected president, Nelson Mandela, clad in a Springbok jersey, handed [the white] captain Pienaar the trophy in a symbolic event of reconciliation likely to be unmatched in modern day sports'.<sup>5</sup>

South Africa is perhaps the most prominent, but not the only case for sport serving as an instrument to reduce tensions and to unite people:

The French national team's performance in the 1998 World Cup, for example, came at a time of deep ethnic difficulties and offered a welcome, though brief, moment of unity for the country. In 2000, the two Koreas entering the Olympic Stadium in Sydney, Australia, together as one team was arguably the highlight of the opening ceremony as it gave the world a moment to imagine through sport an end to the Cold War in Korea and a unified country. The victory of the Iraqi football team, composed of Sunni and Shia players, at the July 2007 Asian Cup offered a moment of unity for all sects to enjoy amid a deteriorating civil order at home.<sup>6</sup>

Taking experiences from other countries into consideration, it seems to make sense that the Lebanese politicians chose football for reconciliation, as it is, alongside basketball, one of the most popular sports in the country. This event is ironic when compared to past experiences of the role of sport in the Lebanese society. The main argument in this article will be that the sports sector in Lebanon is used to divide Lebanese society and not to unite it. The tensions in the sports sector do not only reflect sectarianism in the country, but also play a role in deepening sectarian divisions. Professional sports are the most divisive sectors there. The fact that the game between the politicians on 13 April was broadcast live on TV, but was played without any audience amid security fears, gives an idea of the explosive force of sport, specifically football and basketball, in Lebanon.

Considering the country's small size (about four million inhabitants) the Lebanese political system is well studied.<sup>7</sup> One of the reasons for this is that the multi-ethnic, multi-sectarian country, with its 18 state-recognised religious sects, is considered the prototype of a confessional republic. The key characteristic of such a system is the proportional allocation of political positions among religious communities and will be explained below more in detail.

In existing literature on the topic there have been some journalistic descriptions of sectarianism in Lebanese sport.<sup>8</sup> But there is a lack of academic literature on the role of sport in Lebanese society. Exceptions are two more historically oriented studies, one of them a Masters thesis, the other a dissertation. The first is a sociological examination of the development of basketball from its beginning at the American University of Beirut in the late

19th century until today; the other presents a history of sports policy in Lebanon from 1975 to 2004.<sup>9</sup> This lack of academic literature is the reason why, for this research, interviews with athletes and representatives of football and basketball clubs' administrations were carried out.

The goal of this article is to link sectarianism with sport and to present an original model of the relationship between sectarianism and sport in Lebanon. The article starts by analysing sport and sectarianism in other countries before turning to the empirical analysis of the case of Lebanon and finally developing the theoretical model. The research questions of the paper are: is the role of sport in Lebanese politics a unique case in comparative politics? What are the reasons for the politicisation of Lebanese sport? Does this phenomenon differ between genders? Is sport in Lebanon a reflection of the confessional political system that makes competition only possible within sects? Or is it a sphere of open competition? What potential can it have in the future to unite Lebanese society?

### **Sport and sectarianism—a comparative perspective**

The existing literature on sport and sectarianism mainly covers Scotland and Northern Ireland. A famous case is the rivalry between the Glasgow football clubs Rangers and Celtic. In Glasgow sport has become the symbol of social, political and religious causes that divide the community. Both clubs were already founded in the 19th century and represented the sectarian divisions between working men in Glasgow. Celtic was founded as a charitable organisation to provide free meals and clothing to the Catholic poor; the sports department was added to the club later. Celtic has always been proud of its ties to Ireland, as one can still see today in the green club colours. Rangers, on the other hand, was Protestant and represented the anti-Catholicism of the ruling elite in Scotland. It was not until 1976 that Rangers declared an end to its policy of not employing Catholic players. But even today matches between the two clubs are 'life-and-death struggles'.<sup>10</sup>

In Northern Ireland the local football culture has tended to be characterised by divisions, with prominent nationalist clubs (Belfast Celtic or, since the late 1970s, Cliftonville) being pitted against unionist adversaries (Linfield, Glentoran, Portadown). Support for Celtic and Rangers adheres strictly to the sectarian contours of Northern Irish society and, at least in the recent past, Catholics support the Republic of Ireland's national side and Protestants favour Northern Ireland.<sup>11</sup>

### **Sport and sectarianism—an empirical analysis of the case of Lebanon**

The case of Lebanon is unique in that: 1) it is not just a few (like Celtic and Rangers in Scotland) but almost all professional sports clubs that have clear sectarian and political affiliations; and 2) in a 'mosaic society'<sup>12</sup> with 18 state-registered religious sects, many more communities are involved in comparison with the Northern Ireland and Scottish cases. Tables 1 and 2

TABLE 1. Football, Lebanese Premier League Club, season 2009–10

Club name	Sectarian affiliation	Political affiliation
Al-Ahli Sidon (Saida)	Sunni Muslim	Ahmad Hariri/Future Movement (March 14)
Al-Ahed (Beirut)	Shia Muslim	Hezbollah (March 8)
Al-Ansar (Beirut)	Sunni Muslim	Saad Hariri/Future Movement (March 14)
Al Islah Bourg Shemaly (Sour)	Shia Muslim	Amal Movement by Nabih Berri (March 8)
Hikmeh (Beirut)	Maronite Christian	Lebanese Forces (March 14)
Al-Mabarra (Beirut)	Shia Muslim	March 8
Shabab Al Ghazieh (Ghazieh)	Shia Muslim	Amal Movement by Nabih Berri (March 8)
Nejmeh SC (Beirut)	Transformation process from Shia to Sunni Muslim	Saad Hariri/Future Movement (March 14)
Racing Beirut (Beirut)	Orthodox Christian	Saad Hariri/Future Movement (March 14)
Safa Sporting Club (Beirut)	Druze	Walid Jumblat/Progressive Socialist Party (Former March 14 ally, sided with March 8 as of January 2011)
Shabab Al Sahel (Beirut)	Shia Muslim	March 8
Tadamon Sour (Tyre)	Shia Muslim	March 8

Source: Compiled by the author from interviews and press articles.

TABLE 2. Men's basketball, Division A, season 2009–10

Club name	Sectarian affiliation	Political affiliation
Anibal Zahle (Zahle)	Maronite Christian	Aoun/Free Patriotic Movement (March 8)
Antranik SC (Antelias)	Armenian	Ram Gavar (March 14)
Blue Stars	Maronite Christian	Aoun/Free Patriotic Movement (March 8)
Champville SC (Deek El Mehdi)	Maronite Christian	Aoun/Free Patriotic Movement (March 8)
Hikmeh (Beirut)	Maronite Christian	Lebanese Forces (March 14)
Hoops club	Shia Muslim	March 8
Kahraba Zouk (Zouk, Keserwan)	Maronite Christian	Lebanese Forces (March 14)
Al Mouttahed Tripoli (Tripoli)	Sunni Muslim	Safadi Foundation (March 14)
Sporting Al Riyadi (Beirut)	Sunni Muslim	Saad Hariri/Future Movement (March 14)
Tebnin SC (Tebnine/Sour)	Shia Muslim	Amal (March 8)

Source: Compiled by the author from interviews and press articles.

show the sectarian and political affiliations of all the first division clubs in the two most popular sports in Lebanon, football and basketball.

The tables show that all the most prominent 18 state-registered 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. In addition, there are Orthodox Christian, Druze and Armenian clubs. Other sects that

have no clubs in the first league are nevertheless represented in lower divisions. In the 2008–09 season both the football champion (Nejmeh SC) and the basketball champion (Sporting Al Riyadi) were politically affiliated with the family of the former prime minister Saad Hariri, who supported both clubs directly and indirectly (via sponsorships from companies which belong to the family, such as Future TV, BankMed, etc). Nejmeh is an interesting case, because it was the last club without a clear sectarian affiliation. It was founded in 1945 as the first non-Christian football club in Lebanon by Druze, Sunnis and Shia and was for a long time the most popular club. In 1974 the Brazilian star Pelé even played some (unofficial) matches for the team. In 2003 the club was purchased by the Hariri family and many Shia fans switched to other clubs such as Al-Ahed.<sup>13</sup>

In the 2007–08 season a Shia Muslim (Al-Ahed) club funded by Hezbollah—which is considered a terrorist organisation by the US but not by the EU—became the Lebanese football champion for the first time. ‘This will help Hezbollah to say it is not only about arms and the resistance to Israel’, a journalist commented.<sup>14</sup> Al-Ahed’s jersey sponsor is Al-Manar, Hezbollah’s satellite television station.

When observing some basketball and football matches, I could hear the fans chanting slogans referring to their religion, political leader and residential area, such as ‘Allah, Hariri, Tarik El Jdeedeh’ (from the Sporting Al Riyadi fans) and ‘Allah, Nasrallah, will Dahieh killa [and the Dahieh]’ (from the Al-Ahed and Tebnin supporters). Until 2005, on one level, the main rivalries in football and basketball were between different religions (Muslims versus Christians). Matches between the two most successful Lebanese basketball teams, Hikmeh (Christian-Maronite) and Sporting Al Riyadi (Sunni-Muslim), were often full of tension, including violent clashes between the different groups of supporters.<sup>15</sup>

On another level there were rivalries between the main sects within particular religions, such as that between the football clubs Racing (Orthodox Christian) and Hikmeh (Maronite Christian), which are both from Achrafieh, one of the oldest Christian districts of East Beirut. There were also many fights after games between these teams.<sup>16</sup>

Since 2005 the main rivalries in football and basketball have changed—a reflection of a general shift that took place in Lebanese politics at that time. The turning point came in February 2005 with the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the Lebanese prime minister between 1992 and 1998 and 2000 and 2004. Since Hariri’s assassination, Lebanese politics has been divided into two blocs: March 8 and March 14, which I will discuss below. All the first-division football and basketball clubs are affiliated with one of these alliances, and there are often rumours that clubs support each other within their bloc by, for example, not letting their best players play when the other club is in need of points for the championship, or to qualify for the domestic play-offs (in basketball) and international competitions or to avoid being relegated.

The most important members of March 8 are the Shia Muslim parties Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, as well as the Maronite Christian Free

Patriotic Movement, led by Michel Aoun, a former commander of the Lebanese army. By far the leading party in the March 14 alliance is the Sunni Muslim Future Movement, led by the son of the late prime minister Rafik Hariri, Saad Hariri. Other important partners are the Maronite Christian parties Lebanese Forces and the Phalangist Kataeb Party.<sup>17</sup>

The main differences between March 8 and March 14 are their external sponsors: March 8 is considered to be pro-Syrian, and one of its main members, Hezbollah, is in addition pro-Iranian. It is no secret that the 'Party of God' receives funding from the Islamic Republic.<sup>18</sup> March 14, on the other hand, is pro-Western but also pro-Saudi. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran are struggling for hegemony in the Middle East, and all the parties in Lebanese politics have clearly chosen sides in this struggle.

Although this section has focused on the two most popular sports in Lebanon, basketball and football, it should be mentioned that sectarian and political affiliations are not exclusive to these two sports. One can find them in swimming and table tennis, for example, too. Competition in swimming goes so far that some clubs fly in athletes from the Lebanese diaspora for championships. It seems that only sports that are new to Lebanon, such as rugby league, have not (yet) been captured by religious and political leaders.<sup>19</sup>

### Sectarianism and gender

In both professional men's and women's teams all the teams are mixed, with players from different sects and religions; there is no policy of not hiring players from certain sects. However, a difference between men's and women's sports in Lebanon is that the proxy conflicts via sport between and within religions (before 2005) and between political blocs (since 2005) mainly takes place in men's sports. Nonetheless, Tables 3 and 4 show that the main female basketball and football clubs do have sectarian, but not necessarily political, affiliations.

TABLE 3. Women's basketball, Division A, season 2009–10

Club name	Sectarian affiliation	Political affiliation
Antranik (Antelias)	Armenian	Ram Gavar (March 14)
Sporting Al Riyadi (Beirut)	Sunni Muslim	Saad Hariri/Future Movement (March 14)
Homentment Antelias (Antelias)	Armenian	No political affiliation
Homentmen Beirut (Beirut)	Armenian	No political affiliation
Homentmen Bourj Hamoud (Beirut)	Armenian	No political affiliation
La Toure Aintoura (Aintoura)	Maronite Christian	No political affiliation
Al Mouttahed Tripoli (Tripoli)	Sunni Muslim	Safadi Foundation (March 14)

Source: Compiled by the author from interviews and press articles.

TABLE 4. Women’s football, First League, 2009–10

Club name	Sectarian affiliation	Political affiliation
Athletico SC	Christian	No political affiliation
Al-Sadaka Club	Shia Muslim	No political affiliation
Al Shabab-Al Arabi	Shia Muslim	No political affiliation
Al Shabab-Tripoli	Sunni Muslim	No political affiliation
Kfarshima	Christian	No political affiliation

*Source:* Compiled by the author from interviews and press articles.

‘They do not expect much followers from us’, one female Division A basketball player explained in an interview, identifying the reason for the low interest among politicians in women’s basketball.<sup>20</sup> Whereas matches in men’s basketball are often sold out and broadcast on TV, women’s matches are mostly attended by families and friends. The only clubs that have political affiliations are those that are branches of a professional men’s team. Since women’s teams are far cheaper to run—the player who was interviewed for this research earns US\$400 per month, whereas men make thousands of dollars—the sponsors only have to add a small percentage to their financial support for the men’s team. But even this is too much for some of them. Al Ansar had a first league women’s football team. The Sunni Muslim club, politically affiliated with the former prime minister Hariri, paid their players a monthly salary of \$200. The club withdrew from the first women’s football league before the 2009–10 season had started in order to put all its resources into the men’s team. Most players transferred to Athletico SC.<sup>21</sup>

An interesting case is the Armenian community’s involvement in women’s basketball. The Armenians ‘are more of an ethnic than a purely religious group in Lebanon’, belonging to the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant branches of Christianity.<sup>22</sup> ‘Women’s basketball is one of the few arenas where the small Armenian community has been able to stand out on the Lebanese national stage . . . Women’s basketball is cheap in comparison to men’s basketball or football.’<sup>23</sup> The promotion of basketball (and table tennis, another Armenian success story) is already starting in the Armenian schools. Armenian players dominate the national team. One of them, Salpy Tchokarian, was the first woman from the Middle East to play in the Women’s National Basketball Association (WNBA), the women’s professional basketball league in the US.<sup>24</sup>

### Sectarianism in Lebanon—a model of the role of sport

In this section I develop a model for the relationship between sectarianism and sport in Lebanon. Figure 1 summarises the model. I will begin by explaining the upper part of the model. In the centre there are the 18 state-recognised religious sects. Of the total Lebanese population, 94.5 per cent belong to one of the six largest sects: Sunni Muslim and Shia Muslim both represent 28 per cent of the population each, 21.5 per cent are Maronite

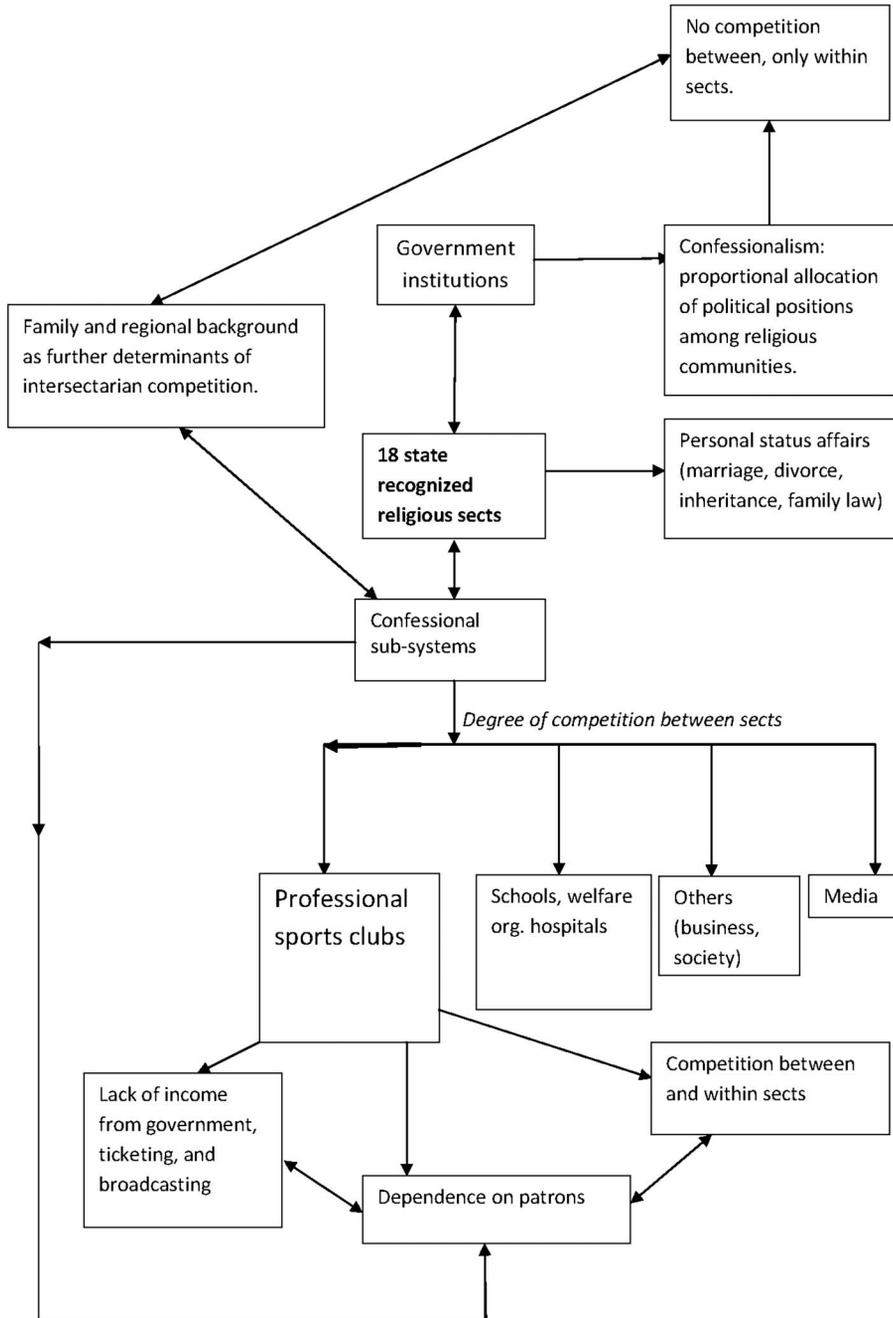


FIGURE 1. Sectarianism and sport in Lebanon.

Christian, eight per cent are Greek Orthodox, five per cent Druze, and four per cent Greek Catholic.<sup>25</sup>

In political science there are two terms for the description of the Lebanese political system: *consociationalism* and *confessionalism*. 'Consociationalism is a mode of governing in which political elites representing different communities coalesce around the need to govern, even in the face of intense divisions across their communities. For example, this concept was devised originally to explain how religious groups in the Netherlands were able to coalesce and govern despite deep historical divisions . . . Consociationalism has been extended to apply to a wider range of political systems, including Belgium, Canada, Malaysia, Colombia, Lebanon and India.'<sup>26</sup> Confessionalism can be seen as one kind of consociationalism and is usually applied to describe the unique Lebanese political system. 'Confessionalism is a system of government that proportionally allocates political power among a country's communities—whether religious or ethnic—according to their percentage of the population.'<sup>27</sup>

Lebanon's 18 state-recognised religious sects have two main functions: the first is their responsibility for personal-status affairs; the second is their access to the main political positions, which are allocated proportionally among them. When it comes to personal-status laws, one can say that there are 18 states within the state of Lebanon: 'The government permits recognized religious groups to administer their own family and personal status law, such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance.'<sup>28</sup> 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 Ta'if Accord of September 1989 officially ended the civil war in Lebanon. It reaffirmed the National Pact of 1943 but introduced several changes in favour of the growing portion of Muslims in the population. Whereas in the National Pact of 1943 seats in parliament were given in a ratio of 6:5 to the Christians (based on a census from 1932), the Ta'if Accord implemented a policy of equal division between Christians and Muslims. Furthermore, the power of the Maronite Christian presidency was reduced; now decrees have to be co-signed by the prime minister. The Ta'if Accord endorsed the constitutional provision of appointing most senior government officials according to religious affiliation. Finally, the Accord introduced a new threshold for decision making: 'The cabinet shall adopt its resolutions by consent. If impossible, then by vote. The resolutions shall be adopted by a majority of the members present. As for major issues, they require the approval of two or three of the cabinet members.'<sup>29</sup>

The Doha Agreement of 23 May 2008 ended an 18-month political crisis in Lebanon. It confirmed on the one hand the main principles of the Ta'if Accord and led on the other hand to the forming of a 'national unity government composed of 30 ministers distributed among the majority (16 ministers), the opposition (11 ministers) and the president (three ministers), and by virtue of this agreement, all parties commit not to resign or obstruct

the government's actions'.<sup>30</sup> The Ta'if and the Doha Agreements made each kind of policy change at the national level even more complicated, which further strengthened the sects and their role as states within a state.

The effect of the proportional allocation of political positions among religious communities and the various other hurdles in the decision-making process (such as needing approval of two or three cabinet members) has meant that 'often political competition was intrasectarian rather than with members of different groups'.<sup>31</sup> Within the three largest religious communities (Shia, Sunnis and Maronite Christians), many parties compete for leadership. 'One party never monopolized the representation of a whole religious community'.<sup>32</sup> Among the Shia, Hezbollah and the Amal Movement (both March 8) are struggling for dominance in their sect. In the Maronite Christian community the largest parties are the Lebanese Forces (LF), Phalange (both March 14) and the Free Patriotic Movement (March 8). Only the Sunni community is mainly dominated by one party, the Future Movement (March 14). But this is a new development since Rafik Hariri was assassinated.

The intra-sectarian competition within sects has been influenced by family and regional backgrounds, two other main determinants besides confession-alism in the Lebanese political system.<sup>33</sup> Sunni prime ministers have in the past come alternately from Beirut and Tripoli; Rafik Hariri was the first Sunni prime minister from Saida. Shia and Maronites have had a similar rotation.<sup>34</sup>

Over many centuries a feudal system has developed in Lebanon in which family clans are the most influential socioeconomic actors. Former ruling powers in Mount Lebanon, such as the Ottoman administration and the French mandate, found it easier to rule the area through an appointed native bourgeoisie, thus giving a few clans economic and political priority over others in order to maintain the balance of power in their interest. Not only did the older clans (referred to as *zuama*) manage to maintain power, but new ones also managed to reach power in the cult of personality competition.<sup>35</sup> The important role of some families in Lebanese politics could be seen at the municipal elections in 2010. If the prominent families and political parties in a municipality can agree on a list of council members, the list wins uncontested and no election takes place. Nearly 20 per cent of the 313 municipalities in Mount Lebanon—the first governorate to vote—did not hold polls because of unity deals.<sup>36</sup>

I will continue by explaining the lower part of my model in Figure 1. Lebanese society is divided into confessional subsystems. Each sect has its own media. For example, Future TV was funded by Rafik Hariri in 1993 and supports the views of his Future Movement. Al-Manar TV supports Hezbollah, NBN TV is affiliated with the Speaker of Parliament, Nabih Berri, etc. Even schools and hospitals have clear sectarian affiliations, but in this sector there is a little bit more competition than in the media. Some parents simply want the best education for their children. Therefore there are cases of Muslims at Christian schools, for example. The same goes for hospitals: some Lebanese give quality a higher weight than the 'correct' affiliation.

Professional sport clubs play a unique role in the sectarian Lebanese system. There is no other sector with so much competition, not only within

sects, as in politics, (see the upper part of the model), but also between sects. 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'.<sup>37</sup> Whereas the political system prevents sects from competing with each other, there are no separate sectarian leagues (ie leagues only for Muslims, only for Christians, or even only for certain branches of one religion such as Shia). Maronites play against Orthodox clubs, Shia against Sunnis, Sunnis against Maronites, and so on (see also Tables 1–4).

Alongside confessionalism and the determinants of family and regional background, clientelism plays a crucial role in the understanding of Lebanese society.<sup>38</sup> There is no distinction between state and civil society in Lebanon. Society is characterised by patron–client relationships.<sup>39</sup> The patrons provide the population with resources such as employment, infrastructure, permits, etc, which in Western democracies are provided by the state. The Lebanese state is much in debt, and the decision-making process is so complicated that the population depends on the patrons' services. In return the population follows the patrons by electing them to parliament or supporting or even joining their militias in situations of civil war. They also do so by chanting sectarian slogans at football and basketball matches (see above).

There are different patrons within confessions who compete with each other for political influence in their communities. For these patrons sport is a most welcome instrument for mobilising followers. On the other hand, professional sport teams are completely dependent on their patrons. In interviews with the Vice-President of the National Basketball Association and with a player in the national team I learned that the revenue from selling tickets and for the TV rights has to be given to the National Basketball Association (for financing referees, the national teams, etc.).<sup>40</sup> They are 100 per cent dependent on patrons. In football the situation is hardly any better. For a long time (from 2006–February 2010) supporters were not even allowed to attend matches. After violent clashes between different groups of supporters in the aftermath of the 2006 war between Hezbollah and Israel, the government banned fans from attending matches. The ban was lifted in early 2010, but stadiums were still almost empty when I attended a number of matches in April 2010. It will take some time before fans will trust that they are coming to a safe environment when attending matches. The government's ban made the teams even more dependent on their political patrons: Johad Shahf of the Lebanese Football Association (LFA) said that Lebanese clubs' tight budgets have allowed the political parties who finance them to intervene more actively in the sport.<sup>41</sup> Before the ban Al Ansar earned about \$60 000 in ticket sales per year, for example.

Additionally, sport teams are no longer receiving as much revenue from TV stations. Al Jazeera sports once paid \$800 000 for broadcasting rights.<sup>42</sup> Without an exciting atmosphere in the stadiums, however, the TV rights became a less interesting product. Now the revenue from Future TV is only

\$200 000 for the whole 2010–11 season. This small amount of money will be divided among the various Lebanese clubs, depending on their ranking. Since the better teams have a budget of about \$1–1.5 million, dependence on patrons is about 98 per cent; for one of the most prominent clubs, Al Ansar, TV rights only account for one per cent. Figure 2 shows the difference between Lebanese and European football clubs. Because the ‘Big Five’—England, Spain, Germany, Italy and France—can hardly be compared with Lebanon, I have added Scotland, a country of similar size that is also characterised by sectarian divisions (see above). Scottish football clubs are on average only 26 per cent dependent on sponsors. The rest of their revenue comes from ticketing and selling broadcasting rights.

Why are the Lebanese clubs dependent on patrons and why can’t they find politically neutral sponsors? The main reason is again the sectarian character of Lebanese society. ‘A few years ago Coca Cola had to sponsor three different football teams representing the Sunnite, Shia and Christian communities to avoid being perceived as taking sides in the sectarian struggle’.<sup>43</sup> This example shows that, 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. They can dictate the conditions under which their sponsorship takes place, thus giving rise to phenomena in Lebanon that one rarely sees in other sports arenas in the world: naming stadiums after patrons, playing in the colours of the party that a team is politically affiliated with, and the display of large posters of one’s patrons around the arena.

Sporting Al-Riyadi’s arch-rival Hikmeh has experienced how it feels when an important supporter withdraws. When the Lebanese Forces, a former

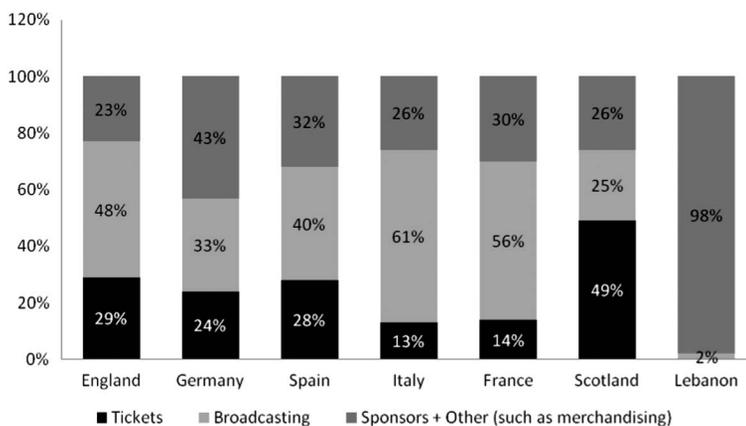


FIGURE 2. An international comparison of football club revenues (season 2007–08). *Source:* For all countries but Lebanon, Deloitte, *Annual Review of Football Finance*, 2009, p 2. For Lebanon, see *The Executive*, October 2009, pp 86–87.

militia headed by Bachir Gemayel during the civil war, were banned in 1994, Hikmeh served as their voice. When they returned after the Cedar Revolution in early 2005 as a legal political party, they withdrew their support, and Hikmeh's basketball programme collapsed—'A winning basketball team was no longer necessary'.<sup>44</sup>

### Conclusion

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.<sup>45</sup> Some might say that this is impossible in a country with 'a plurality of peoples ... having little, or nothing, in common to warrant the establishment and maintenance of a viable state'.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, at some matches involving the Lebanese national football team, Lebanese citizens have cheered for the other team, if the latter shared their sectarian identity.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, the recent example of Bosnia Herzegovina, another multi-religious state,<sup>48</sup> shows how the euphoria around a national sports team—in this case the national football team, which almost qualified for the World Cup 2010 in South Africa—united people.

Since the Lebanese national football team is not very successful—it is ranked 157 in the FIFA rankings<sup>49</sup> and has never qualified for the World Cup—the best candidate for uniting the Lebanese people is the national basketball team. It is among the leading teams in Asia, finishing second three times at the Asian Championship (2001, 2005 and 2007), and has participated in three World Championships (2002, 2006, 2010). In 2006 the highlight of the tournament was Lebanon's 74 to 73 victory over the former colonial power, France.

The problem is that, even at the level of the national teams, there exists a good deal of sectarian interference. Unlike in 2002 and 2006, Lebanon did not qualify for the 2010 Basketball World Championship in Turkey in August–September 2010. However, the Fédération Internationale de Basketball (FIBA) awarded Lebanon one of four available wild cards, alongside Germany, Lithuania and Russia. There was a €500 000 fee to apply for one of the wild card spots (14 countries did so).<sup>50</sup> Lebanon's fee was paid by the then prime minister Saad Hariri via one of his companies, Turkish Telecom. Instead of making use of his position to reach a government decision to pay the fee from the state budget, by personally funding the team via Turkish Telecom, Hariri caused the national basketball team to be labelled a Sunni Muslim team. Not only does Saad Hariri now own the national champions in football and basketball (2008–09 seasons), he is in the eyes of many Lebanese now the only 'owner' of the national basketball team.

In the Ta'if Accord the 'abolition of political sectarianism' was demanded. Twenty years later Lebanon is not less, but more sectarian than ever before since the end of the civil war (the worst division exists between Sunnis and

Shia).<sup>51</sup> The professional sports sector not only reflects sectarianism in Lebanon, it is also the sector contributing the most to manifest it.

Lebanon still has a long way to go to transform itself from a sectarian to a secular state. A unifying civil law that would allow citizens to refer to the state as the only authority in matters of marriage, divorce and inheritance—currently the domain of confessional courts—would be a milestone. But such a development is not very likely since this requires self-restraint from the 18 state-registered sects. Another serious obstacle is the fact that the current confessional formula does not reflect the growth of the number of Shia in the Lebanese population. All the other sects know that the abolition of sectarianism would strengthen the Shia (including Hezbollah) in free elections.<sup>52</sup> But there is at least a first sign of promise for the development of a secular state with a common Lebanese identity: since February 2009 citizens have been able to remove their religious affiliation from their registry records.<sup>53</sup>

There are also some signs of hope in the world of sport. GAM3, for example, is an NGO that is promoting street basketball tournaments based on the idea ‘of using sport as a vehicle for social change’. According to GAM3, in 2008 almost 7000 people participated at its practices in Lebanon, 34 per cent of the participants being girls:

GAM3’s vision is to make urban sports and cultural activities available to everyone in order to empower youth and prevent conflict and marginalization. GAM3’s basketball drills promote tolerance, trust, and mutual respect, which can prevent discrimination both on and off the court. GAM3 uses the sport to promote equal opportunities for all. To encourage girl’s participation in sports is important from an equality of gender perspective.”<sup>54</sup>

The NGO Cross Cultures Project Association (CCPA), funded by the Rockwool Foundation, is carrying out a project called ‘Football for peace in Lebanon’:

The recipe is simple: football is used as an universal language, spoken by children and adults alike. The aim of the pilot project in Lebanon is to establish football clubs spread across the entire nation. The Rockwool Foundation has insisted that the project should focus on areas with mixed population groups: where the different national groups live in close proximity to one another, and where there are great differences between the groups. The approach is to recruit trainers and children for the clubs from the local population, making every effort to reflect the local demographic mix as closely as possible.<sup>55</sup>

GAM3 and ‘Football for peace in Lebanon’ are not the only initiatives to bring young people from different communities together via sport. But all of them share a common characteristic: they are externally driven (GAM3 and the Rockwool Foundation are both from Denmark, for example). Since one of the few common narratives in the Lebanese society is that there is too much external interference in the country, it seems to me crucial that initiatives such as ‘Football for peace in Lebanon’ are also developed

domestically (especially by the government) to fully exploit the potential of sport to unite a highly fragmented society.

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### Notes

- 1 In the Lebanese civil war 144 240 people were killed and 184 240 were injured. See S Rosiny, *Islamismus bei den Schiiten in Libanon*, Berlin: Verlag Das Arabische Buch, 1996, p 66.
- 2 See, for example, P Galey & K Laurie, 'Lebanese leaders embody unity, kick off April 13 commemorations on football pitch', *The Daily Star* (Beirut), 14 April 2010, pp 1–2.
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- 5 *Ibid.*, p 805.
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- 12 Khashan, *Inside the Lebanese Confessional Mind*, p xiii.
- 13 The case of Nejmeh has been examined in ongoing PhD work and primary results were presented in my class on sports and politics at the American University of Beirut on 15 October 2009. Muzna Al-Masri 'Negotiating patron–client relationships in conflict: recreating the sectarian identity of Lebanon's football champion club', PhD dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London.
- 14 See 'Mad-East, Hezbollah shoots ... on goal', at <http://www.madeast.com/HezbollahStory.html>, accessed 28 April 2010.
- 15 Mc Clenahan, *Lebanese Sport from a Basketball Perspective*, p 146.
- 16 Montage, *When Friday Comes*, pp 246–247.
- 17 See 'March 14 Alliance—Lebanon's Cedar Revolution', at <http://middleeast.about.com/od/lebanon/g/me090427a.htm>, accessed 27 April 2010; and 'March 8 Alliance (Lebanon's opposition coalition)', at <http://middleeast.about.com/od/lebanon/g/me090427.htm>, accessed 27 April 2010. March 14 has its own website with an English version, available at <http://www.14march.org/news-listing.php?id=MTMwOTEy>, accessed 27 April 2010.

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- 20 Interview with Sally Yamak, player from Al Mouttahed Tripoli, 16 April 2010.
- 21 Interview with Dima Krayem, player Athletico SC and captain of the national women's football team, 21 April 2010.
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- 43 Al Ansar manager Diab, quoted in *ibid.*, p 87.
- 44 Mc Clenahan, *Lebanese Sport from a Basketball Perspective*, p 125.
- 45 For this thought, see also the commentary of K Makdisi: 'An indicator of national reconciliation? On football and politics in Lebanon', *CounterPunch*, 5–6 July 2008, at <http://www.counterpunch.org/makdisi07062008.html>, accessed 6 May 2010.
- 46 Khashan, *Inside the Lebanese Confessional Mind*, p 1.
- 47 Interview with Hilal Khashan, Professor of Comparative Politics in the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration at the American University of Beirut, 14 April.
- 48 For a comparison of Lebanon and Bosnia Herzegovina, see Bieber, 'Bosnia–Herzegovina and Lebanon', pp 269–281.
- 49 According to the ranking from 28 April 2010, at <http://www.fifa.com/worldfootball/ranking/lastranking/gender=m/fullranking.html#confederation=0&rank=192&page=4>, accessed 4 May 2010.
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