Why developing countries are just spectators in the ‘Gold War’: the case of Lebanon at the Olympic Games

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Why developing countries are just spectators in the ‘Gold War’: the case of Lebanon at the Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT
At the Olympic Games, there is an increasing gap between developed countries that are investing more and more government resources into sporting success, and developing countries that cannot afford the “Gold War”, and are just spectators in the medal race. Based on studying a representative case, Lebanon, I investigate issues and interests of developing countries in the Olympics. On the political level, the main motivation for participation is global recognition. On the sporting level, developing countries seek to use Olympic participation as preparation for regional Games where success is more likely, serving as a soft power tool for regional influence.

Introduction
The 10 athletes who represented Lebanon in 2012 at the last Summer Olympics, the greatest mega-sporting event in the world, will have positive memories of the Games, mostly based on their participation in the opening and closing ceremonies. Their sporting achievements in London were modest: no athlete won an Olympic medal. Aside from two exceptions (two female athletes made it to the second round, one in fencing and one in taekwondo), all the Lebanese athletes lost their first round races, fights and matches, and exited the Olympic stage at the earliest possible moment.

Lebanon, the case studied in this article, is representative of the vast majority of developing countries: at London 2012 Lebanon belonged to a group comprised of about 58% of all participating countries (119 out of 204) that did not win a single medal. In 2014 at the Sochi Winter Olympic Games, Lebanon was one of some 70% of the participating countries (62 out of 88) that did not win a medal. Lebanon was able to win four Olympic medals between 1952 and 1980, something no longer imaginable today in an age of athletic professionalism. One-third of all the 204 National Olympic Committees that participated in London 2012 have never won any medal in Olympic history.1 The last time that the majority of participants won a medal at the Summer Olympics was in 1960, when 52% of participants won.2 Baimbridge concludes: ‘The games are an unequal competition between nations’.3

Baimbridge examined the uncertainty of Olympic medal winning, defined as the number of medal-winning nations in relation to those represented. His analysis covered the Summer Olympics from 1896 to 1996. The results were that this indicator fell from a peak national...
success rate of 90.9% at the London Games of 1908 to a low point of 32.7% 80 years later in Seoul. While this percentage increased slightly to 42% in London 2012, ‘the summer Games have become increasingly competitive and thus medals have become relatively harder to win’.

According to the elite sport academic literature, there is a ‘global sporting arms race’ going on in the world, with the Olympic Games being the main stage. According to this body of literature, sport offers countries an arena for competition to gain international prestige, and to have more soft power than other countries. There has been globally a ‘significant intensification in government involvement in sport policy’ and worldwide elite sport expenditures are increasing apace: ‘In all the countries…there has been a substantial increase in funding allocated to elite sport’. Other authors say there is a global trend towards homogeneity of elite sport policies: ‘The sport systems of all countries focus quite strongly and consistently upon success in international competitions, strong and relatively centralized elite sport organizations, systematic and professional coaching, the establishment of elite sport centre(s), and the use of scientific methods to improve the functioning of the whole elite sport system’.

A weakness of these publications is that they generalise based on a limited number of case studies of highly developed, democratic countries and Olympic powerhouses such as Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway and the UK. However, the reality is that a majority of countries in the world are just spectators and not participants in the new ‘Gold War’ that has replaced, according to a headline from the Wall Street Journal, the ‘Cold War’. Developing countries such as Lebanon have only limited financial resources allocated to the sports sector, and the government lacks a strategic approach to make elite sport success possible. Many developing countries like Lebanon are weak states: ‘A weak state is a state that lacks the capacity for effective action across a range of state functions’. In addition to having difficulties providing the population with basic public goods, developing countries also usually lack sport institutions, such as the Olympiatoppen in Norway or the Australian Institute of Sport in Australia. Those institutions organise the elite sport sector, and develop strategies to be successful at the Olympic Games.

Not all developing countries completely lack policies for the promotion of elite sport. However, after a policy has been agreed on, it must be put into effect and implementation failure is very common in weak states, as the example of Lebanon shows.

Apart from a few exceptions such as Cuba, Ethiopia and Kenya, the Olympic motto, ‘Taking part is everything’, is more than a popular phrase: it precisely describes the approach of most developing countries such as Lebanon. The aim of this article is to investigate the interests of developing countries in participating in the Olympics and to deepen the understanding of the motives of such countries for taking part in the Games, when they are not likely to win medals. The objective of the article is to make a unique contribution to the academic literature by focusing on unsuccessful developing, rather than successful developed countries, which enjoy most of the scholarly (and media) spotlight but represent only a minority of all participating countries.

Methodology
The article combines a qualitative investigation of a specific topic – Lebanon at the Olympic Games – with a link to wider themes in the study of politics, as well as to the issues and
interests of developing countries in international sport. The case of Lebanon is an instance of a more general category: ‘To conduct such a study is therefore to undertake an investigation with significance beyond its own boundaries.’ While there are certainly some specifics about Lebanon – a tiny, multi-religious Middle Eastern country that needs to balance the interests of Christians and Muslims even in international mega-sporting events such as the Olympic Games – the country is a representative case. The results of this research can be transferred to other developing countries and contribute to a broader understanding of the topic of developing countries at the Olympic Games. I will argue, first, that there is common external influence, scholarships and other aid programmes from the International Olympic Committee, that make the participation of developing countries at the Olympic Games possible; and, second, that the interests of developing countries in the Olympic Games are, at the political level, global recognition and, at the sporting level, the preparation for regional Games where sporting success is more likely than at the global level.

This research is based on primary data and secondary sources. The primary data collected by the researcher himself were eight interviews with Lebanese participants (athletes and officials) in the Olympic Games and with other observers: interviews were conducted with two former Lebanese participants at the Summer Olympic Games, one man and one woman, both in track and field; the chair of the Lebanese National Olympic Committee (NOC); the head of Lebanon’s delegation to the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro; Lebanon’s member in the International Olympic Committee (IOC); the head of the Lebanese gymnastics federation; a senior editor of the newspaper Al Hayat, who also serves as media officer of the Lebanese national soccer association; and a professor from the Notre Dame University Lebanon, who specialises in Lebanese sports. The interviews were semi-structured and in-depth. They discussed opinions and feelings about, as well as experiences with Lebanon’s participation in the Olympic Games, and the respondents’ views on Lebanon’s and other developing countries’ interests in competing in the Olympics. The chosen format of asking a series of open-ended questions had the advantages of allowing more fluid interactions between the researcher and the respondent and of providing a multi-perspective understanding of the topic by not limiting respondents to a fixed set of answers.

Furthermore, as a professor in Lebanon since 2008, I have directly experienced the unit under study, and regularly interact with sports officials and athletes, among them participants in the Olympic Games, some of whom are students at my university.

In addition to primary data, the research is based on different secondary sources: previous research on the politics of Lebanese sport and on global elite sport policies, a growing body of literature that is usually focused on successful developed, and not unsuccessful developing countries, official statistics on historical data of Lebanon’s participation in the Olympic Games, available on the website of the International Olympic Committee, different mass media products, and government reports.

Lebanon at the Olympic Games

After Lebanon declared its independence from France in 1943, the country participated in the Olympic Games, starting with the London Summer Olympics in 1948. The 1956 Summer Olympic Games in Melbourne, were boycotted by Lebanon, Iraq and Syria in protest over the Suez crisis, during which Israel invaded Egypt, followed by Britain and France, after President Abdel Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal. Lebanon was not able to send athletes to the 1994 and 1998 Winter Olympics.
Table 1 shows Lebanon’s participation at 32 Olympic Games from 1948 to 2014, 16 Summer and 16 Winter Olympics. A total of 212 athletes represented Lebanon in the Olympics, 81% of them (172) at the Summer Games and 19% of them (40) at the Winter Games. This is in contrast to Norway, a country with a similar population size of about five million people but, unlike Lebanon, highly developed. Norway sent 200 athletes to the 2012 Summer and 2014 Winter Olympic Games alone (66 in London 2012, 134 in Sochi 2014), almost as many in only two Games as Lebanon sent in 32 stagings of the Olympics combined.

Lebanon endured an intense civil war from 1975 until 1990. Interestingly, the small Mediterranean country fielded its largest team during the middle of its civil war years, sending 22 athletes to Los Angeles in Summer 1984 and 21 to Seoul in Summer 1988. There were four Lebanese participants at the 1984 and 1988 Winter Olympic Games, a number that has never been topped before or after the civil war. According to Stanton, ‘Sports provided a key link to the international community at a time when many Lebanese felt disconnected from the outside world’\textsuperscript{14} Since the war ended, Lebanese Olympic team numbers have declined, at both the Summer and the Winter Olympic Games.

What has changed in the Lebanese Olympic team over time is the representation of women. Lebanon’s Olympic team has included women since the 1972 Summer Olympic Games in Munich, 40 years earlier than two other Middle Eastern countries, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which included women in their Olympic squad for the first time at the London 2012 Games.\textsuperscript{15} At the London 2012 Games, the Lebanese Olympic team consisted for the first time of more female (seven) than male (three) athletes, demonstrating that Lebanon is a more modern and open society than other Middle Eastern countries.

Table 2 shows that Lebanon has won four medals in the history of the Olympic Games. All medals were won at Summer Games, two of them at the 1952 Helsinki Games and one each in Munich 1972 and Moscow 1980. All the medals were won by men; three of the four

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1948</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1952</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1956</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1960</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1964</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1976</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

were won in the same sport – Greco-Roman wrestling. The fourth medal was won in weightlifting.

The data presented for Lebanon are not different from those for the vast majority of developing countries at the Olympics, characterised by small team sizes, and hardly any medals won at the Games. Stanton writes in her case study on Lebanon’s neighbour, Syria: ‘The primary achievement for Syria as for other newly independent states was not medalling in the Olympics, nor even fielding a sizeable cohort, but participating’.16

Unlike many other developing countries Lebanon has participated in the Winter Olympics, something that can mainly be explained by the relatively favourable winter sports conditions in the country, with six developed ski resorts. However, the very small number of Lebanese Winter sport participants (40 in total over 16 Games) shows that the country has not developed serious elite sport capacities in this domain, in addition to the fact that only a limited number of people in Lebanon can afford to ski.

Table 3 (see below) shows that eight out of 10 Lebanese participants in the 2012 Summer Olympic Games lost their first round races, fights and matches. Two Lebanese women, Andrea Paoli and Mona Shaito, were the exceptions. Mona Shaito’s first-round victory against a fencer from Egypt, and Andrea Paoli’s first-round victory against an athlete from Cuba, were the

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**Table 2. Lebanese medallists at the Olympic Games.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Games</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Medal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helsinki 1952</td>
<td>Wrestling Greco-Roman</td>
<td>67-73kg (welterweight)</td>
<td>Khalil Taha</td>
<td>Bronze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helsinki 1952</td>
<td>Wrestling Greco-Roman</td>
<td>52-57kg (bantamweight)</td>
<td>Zakaria Chihab</td>
<td>Silver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Munich 1972</td>
<td>Weightlifting</td>
<td>67.5-75kg (middleweight)</td>
<td>Kheir Mohamed Tarabulsi</td>
<td>Silver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moscow 1980</td>
<td>Wrestling Greco-Roman</td>
<td>+100kg (super heavyweight)</td>
<td>Hassan Bchara</td>
<td>Bronze</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: [http://www.olympic.org/lebanon](http://www.olympic.org/lebanon)

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**Table 3. The Lebanese Olympic team at the 2012 Games.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sport</th>
<th>Participation based on</th>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Origin</th>
<th>Religion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bassil, Ray</td>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>Wild Card</td>
<td>Dropped out in 1st round</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachrouche, Katya Chamas, Caren</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Universality</td>
<td>Dropped out in 1st round</td>
<td>Diaspora (U.S.)</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hazer, Ahmad</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>Wild Card</td>
<td>Dropped out in 1st round</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Koubrousli, Wael</td>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Universality</td>
<td>Dropped out in 1st round</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mounjoghlian, Tvin Carole Paoli, Andrea</td>
<td>Table tennis</td>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>Dropped out in 1st round (quarterfinal)</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaito, Mona</td>
<td>Fencing</td>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>Dropped out in 2nd round (Round of 32)</td>
<td>Diaspora (U.S.)</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaito, Zain</td>
<td>Fencing</td>
<td>Qualification</td>
<td>Dropped out in 1st round</td>
<td>Diaspora (U.S.)</td>
<td>Muslim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taslakian, Greta</td>
<td>Athletics</td>
<td>Universality</td>
<td>Dropped out in 1st round</td>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>Christian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Interview with the head of the Lebanese delegation for the 2016 Olympic Games, Mazen Ramadan, and own elaboration.
only tastes of success for Lebanon. Since in Taekwondo there are only 16 participants in each of the eight weight divisions at the Olympics, Paoli advanced to the quarterfinal with only one victory, one short of reaching semi-final qualification.

**Difficulties in qualifying for the Olympics**

Similarly to other developing countries, a vast majority of Lebanese athletes are not competitive at the international level and face problems in regularly qualifying for Olympic events. As Table 3 shows, only four out of 10 Lebanese participants in the 2012 Summer Games were able to qualify: Tvin Carole Moumjoghlian in table tennis, Andrea Paoli in taekwondo, and Mona Shaito and her brother Zain Shaito in fencing.

The International Federations (IF) from each Olympic sport set qualification rules for events at the Games. They are different from federation to federation. Taking the example of men’s basketball, one of the most popular and successful team sports in Lebanon, the International Basketball Association (FIBA) decided that 12 countries could participate with their team in the basketball event in the Rio 2016 summer Olympics. FIBA granted a wild card to the host country, Brazil, and decided that the reigning world champion, the USA, would be automatically qualified for the event. FIBA allocated seven spots to its five continental associations, only one of them to FIBA Asia. The remaining three spots would be reserved for the best three teams of three FIBA qualifying tournaments in 2016, which would invite 18 countries, among them three from Asia.

From Asia, China qualified for the men’s basketball event in Rio 2016 by winning the Asian basketball championship that took place in the Chinese city of Changsha in September/October 2015. Lebanon narrowly missed one of the FIBA qualification tournaments by finishing in fifth place at the 2015 Asian championship. The countries ranked 2–4, the Philippines, Iran, and Japan, qualified for one of the additional FIBA qualifying tournaments.

When Tvin Carole Moumjoghlian qualified for the London 2012 table tennis tournament, she did so as the winner of the West Asian table tennis championship and benefited from the fact that the qualification in her sport, different from most other events at the Olympic Games, was not organised at the continental level, where it would have been more difficult to qualify, given that Chinese players dominate table tennis in Asia (and worldwide).

Six out of the 10 Lebanese participants in London 2012 did not qualify but were still invited to the Games. There are two tools to ensure that athletes from all over the world are present at the Olympic Games: wild cards and the invitation places (universality mechanism). Invitation places are offered to National Olympic Committees (NOC) with few or no athletes qualified to participate in the Olympic Games. The rules for invitation places are set by the so-called Tripartite Commission, a body comprised of the IOC, the Association of National Olympic Committees (ANOC), and the Association of Summer Olympic International Federations (ASOIF).

For London 2012 the Tripartite Commission decided that those NOCs could apply for invitation places ‘with an average of six (6) or less athletes at the last two editions of the Olympic Games’. After being represented in Athens 2004 by only five, and in Beijing in 2008 by only six athletes (see Table 1), Lebanon was consequently eligible for invitation places for the Summer Games. For Rio 2016 the Tripartite Commission decided ‘Invitation Places can only be allocated to NOCs with an average of eight (8) or less athletes (athlete quota places) in individual sports/disciplines at the last two editions of the Olympic Games (Beijing and
Under this criterion Lebanon is again eligible to apply for invitation places, since the average of London 2012 (10 participants) and Beijing 2008 (six participants) is eight. For Rio 2016 there are a total of 110 invitation places in 16 individual sports; there are no invitation places in team sports such as basketball. There will be additional invitation places in athletics and swimming allocated by the respective international federations and not the Tripartite Commission. Table 3 shows that Lebanon benefited in London 2012 from additional invitation places from the International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF) and the International Swimming Federation (FINA): Gretta Taslakian and Ahmad Hazer in athletics and Katya Bachrouche and Wael Koubrousli in swimming were invited by IAAF and FINA to participate in London 2012.

Apart from invitation places from the Tripartite Commission, there are wild cards allotted by the International Sporting Federations. As Table 3 shows, two Lebanese athletes received wild cards for London 2012: Caren Chammas in judo and Ray Bassil in shooting. There is no academic literature and hardly any other written information available on the Olympic policies of invitation places and wild cards. According to Mazen Ramadan, head of Lebanon’s delegation for Rio 2016, there are usually two female and two male invitation places in total for an eligible country. Wild cards, unlike invitation places, are more based on the performance of athletes and awarded to the ‘best athletes in the world after qualification’, said Ramadan when interviewed for this research. While invitation places mainly go to developing countries, wild cards are also awarded to athletes from sports powerhouses, such as in London 2012 when wild cards were awarded to French tennis players. Eight male and six female players received wild cards from the International Tennis Federation (ITF) for London 2012, with 64 participants in both male and female competitions.

None of the Lebanese athletes with invitation places or wild cards made it to the second round in London 2012, while every other qualified athlete was able to succeed in the first stage of the Games (see Table 3). According to Mazen Ramadan, ‘we don’t have high hopes for medals’. Lebanon’s objective for Rio 2016 and other future Olympic Games is ‘to qualify the largest number of athletes possible’.

Dependence on external support

Problems that apply to Lebanon and other developing countries are difficulties in implementing policies for the promotion of the elite sport sector, lack of governmental funding and dependence on external support for the promotion of Olympic athletes. An example of implementation failure is Lebanon’s Ministry of Youth and Sport Strategy 2010–2020, which was released in 2009 but, according to Mazen Ramadan, ‘never implemented: what was implemented was more by coincidence’. The strategic plans detailed mission, values and objectives for the Lebanese sports sector. Apart from the establishment of a national sports academy and a national sports conference, among the proposed policies is the identification of sports in which Lebanon could perform well at the international level. Such specialisation has been the key for international sporting success for many countries. Examples of such an approach also exist among some developing countries, eg Cuba in boxing, and both Ethiopia and Kenya in running.

According to Mazen Ramadan, the promotion of elite sport is no priority for the government: ‘We are functioning based on IOC support’. While there is sometimes financial support from the Lebanese government, it does not occur on a reliable, annual basis. From 2008 to
In 2012 the Lebanese National Olympic Committee received roughly US$500,000 from the IOC. For the next Olympic cycle (2012–16), it is set to receive about $1 million from the IOC. For the preparation of Lebanese athletes for the 2016 Games in Rio, Lebanon is receiving $132,000 from Olympic Solidarity (OS), an individual scholarship programme within the IOC based on income from the sale of TV rights. This money is allocated among 11 Lebanese athletes, who receive a monthly stipend of $550 over a period of two years before the Games. This amount can be different in other countries and depends on the total amount a NOC receives from OS and the number of athletes nominated by the NOC. For the 2016 Games in Rio countries can nominate up to 15 athletes for OS support.

Apart from the scholarships, OS helps in other ways, eg by giving a travel subsidy of $5000 for Olympic qualification events, an important issue for athletes from poor NOCs. Finally, athletes can choose to prepare in their home country or train in one of the facilities of the global training centre network established by OS (which pays for this as well).

OS’s main objective is ‘to promote universal representation at the Olympic Games. Consequently, candidates from NOCs that have traditionally sent small delegations to the Games will be prioritized. Olympic Solidarity intends to apply the principle of solidarity when allocating scholarships by favoring the NOCs with the greatest needs’. OS ensures that the Olympic Games are a true global event that brings people from all over the world together, not just athletes from developed countries that compete for medals. This goes back to the mission of the IOC stated in the Olympic Charter: ‘to promote Olympism throughout the world’ and ‘to contribute to building a peaceful and better world’.

The IOC started to provide help to NOCs in need in the 1960s. With the significant increase of television revenue starting from the 1984 Olympic Games in Los Angeles, the IOC was able to significantly expand its aid programmes. For the London 2012 Games, the OS programme selected worldwide 1264 Olympic scholarship holders:

Olympic Solidarity proudly noted that 657 scholarship holders from 165 NOCs had obtained their ticket for the Games, either through the IF qualification system or at the invitation of the Tripartite Commission. Olympic scholarship holders played a significant role during the 16 days of competition, winning a total of 76 medals (23 gold, 23 silver and 30 bronze).

The participation of the entire Lebanese team at the 2012 Olympic Games was paid for by the Organizing Committee of the Games. Apart from the 10 athletes representing Lebanon in London, this included all other members of the delegation.

The development and assistance budget approved by the OS Commission for the 2013–16 quadrennial plan ahead of the Rio Games is $438 million, an increase of 40% compared with the 2009–12 plan. For the 2013–16 quadrennial plan, OS is offering 17 different programmes split into four separate sections (athletes, coaches, NOC management and promotion of Olympic values).

The three-time Lebanese Olympian, Gretta Taslakian, noted on the IOC stipend when interviewed by the author that ‘the help is sufficient to amateurs but not for professionals. As an athlete one feels left alone in Lebanon. I don’t see any professional athlete in Lebanon.’ For the preparation of the 2016 Rio Games the most promising Lebanese athletes (five out of the 11 athletes funded with IOC stipends) receive additional money from extra funding the Lebanese NOC received from the government, in total about $35,000 divided among the five selected athletes. However, the level of support, even with this extra funding, is limited compared with the support athletes receive in leading sporting countries.
**Diaspora recruitment**

Like other developing countries with a limited elite sport infrastructure, Lebanon makes use of its diaspora, a policy that is sometimes criticised, particularly when the ‘imported’ athletes do not speak the language of their country of origin (in the case of Lebanon, Arabic). Different from other developing countries, there are far more Lebanese people living outside than inside Lebanon, looking for better economic opportunities abroad or having left their country during wartime. While there are about 4.3 million Lebanese living in their home country, there are between 15 and 20 million people of Lebanese origin all over the world. The largest groups of people with Lebanese ancestry live in Brazil (seven million) and in the USA (three million). As Table 3 shows, three of the Lebanese athletes in London 2012 grew up in the USA: Katya Bachrouche was born and raised in Michigan; Zain and Mona Shaito grew up in Texas. The USA is the most successful country of all time at the Olympic Games, and is famous for the integration of elite sport promotion in its educational system. Bachrouche and the Shaito siblings benefited from the promotion of their sports at US universities: the Shaito siblings joined the university fencing team of Ohio State University; Bachrouche was a member of the swimming team at the University of Virginia. They all hold dual citizenship (American and Lebanese). While one could argue in cases such as those of Katya Bachrouche, Zain and Mona Shaito that they are deeply committed to their parents’ country of birth, another truth is that they are excellent athletes but not good enough to represent the country where they grew up, the USA, at the international level.

‘Citizenship of convenience’ is a widespread phenomenon in international sports, where athletes with an immigration background choose to compete for the country that gives them the opportunity to compete at the international level. An extreme example occurred at the 2014 soccer World Cup in Brazil, when 16 of the Algerian squad of 23 were born and grew up in France: ‘This partly reflects an active Algerian strategy of diaspora recruitment, broadly similar to that which took the Republic of Ireland to several World Cups’. However, there is no active recruitment of the Lebanese diaspora. According to my interviews with officials from Lebanese sporting federations and from the NOC, it usually works the other way around: athletes of Lebanese descent living abroad contact the Lebanese associations and offer to compete for Lebanon. A controversial question is often who covers additional transportation costs. One of the athletes interviewed for this work told me that Katya Bachrouche had to pay for her air ticket to London 2012 herself.

**Equal Muslim and Christian representation**

Table 3 shows that five Muslim and five Christian athletes represented Lebanon in London 2012. Lebanon is a multi-religious country with 18 officially recognised religious groups, and the only Middle Eastern country with a significant Christian population. Among the 18 sects there are four Muslim groups, 12 Christian groups, plus the Druze and a Jewish population. Twenty-seven per cent of the estimated 4.3 million Lebanese are Sunni Muslim, 27% Shia Muslim, 21% Maronite Christian, 8% Greek Orthodox, 5.6% Druze, and 5% Greek Catholic, with the remaining 6.5% belonging to smaller Christian groups. There are also very small numbers of Jews, Bahais, Buddhists, Hindus and Mormons. According to the Lebanese constitution, Christians and Muslims have to be represented equally in parliament, the cabinet and in high-level civil service positions. The 1943 National Pact stipulates that the Lebanese
D. ReICHe

president is always Maronite Christian, the prime minister Sunni Muslim and the speaker of parliament Shia Muslim.³⁰

It is striking that all three Lebanese diaspora athletes in London 2012 were Muslims (see Table 3), helping to ensure equal Christian and Muslim representation in the Lebanese team, an unexpressed but common policy in the Lebanese Olympic team that reflects the previously mentioned political system of proportional allocation of positions among sects.

As I learned in an interview with a Lebanese athlete, if the number of athletes in the Lebanese team is not equally divided among Christians and Muslims, as has happened in previous international multi-sport events, it will be balanced by nominating more representatives from the under-represented sect as the officials in the delegation. While there is no official distribution of powers according to religious affiliations inside the Lebanese sport system, sport remains informally structured according to political and religious allegiances.³¹ According to Nassif and Amara, it is evident that confessionism is strongly spread in various sports institutions in the country and weakens Lebanon’s ability to be competitive in international sport. Around 80% of federations are still managed by presidents and general secretaries from the same community: ‘The fact that a sport is dominated by one religious community reduces significantly the number of people interested in it. Generally, athletes, referees and trainers are more prone to choose a sport which is managed by people of their own community.’³²

However, while sport federations are dominated by specific sects, Lebanon’s Olympic teams have broadly reflected the country’s religious diversity, with both Christians and Muslims represented on all teams, with the exception of Games in which only one Lebanese athlete competed.³³

Lebanon won its last medal at the 1980 Summer Olympic Games in Moscow, during which the events of the Games were less competitive as a result of a US-led boycott by a group of Western countries in protest of the USSR’s invasion of Afghanistan.

**Interests of developing countries in the Olympic Games**

For countries such as Lebanon, participation at the Olympics is one of the ‘signs of statehood’ that gains them recognition from the global community of sovereign states. Lebanon was under French mandatory rule before becoming independent in 1943. The concept of ‘signs of statehood’ has, according to Stanton, both a domestic and an international dimension: at the domestic level signs of statehood are a functional and universally recognised currency, an identity-building sign like a national anthem. At the international level, being accepted as a member of the United Nations is the most important sign of statehood. ‘Membership in the Olympic community by no means compares to United Nations membership – but it should be recognized as a second or third-tier international sign of statehood. For new states, particularly in the mid-twentieth century, joining the Olympic community seems to have been high on the checklist of “what we do now that we are a state” ’.³⁴

According to Kang et al, ‘Sport offers a particularly robust resource for postcolonial or smaller countries that lack historical or other contemporary sources of national recognition. When a country lacks sources for global recognition, such as economy, science, and technology, sport often assumes the burden of inventing the nation-state on the global stage.’³⁵

While Lebanon has on paper been independent since 1943, in reality there is considerable external interference in the country. While the Shia Muslim party, Hezbollah, a leading force
in the anti-Western and pro-Syrian ‘March 8’ bloc is financed by Iran, the Future Movement, a Sunni Muslim party from the pro-Western and anti-Syrian government ‘March 14’ bloc, is supported by Saudi Arabia. While there is often the impression that the leading political figures in Lebanon just take orders from abroad (such as Hezbollah, which is fighting with Iranian forces in the Syrian war to support the Assad regime), the Olympic Games give Lebanon legitimacy on the global stage to be an independent country.

At the domestic level, Lebanon is a weak state. Weak states are characterised by ‘low levels of legitimacy, usually due to the strength of local and ethnic allegiances’. The Olympic Games provide the multi-religious country with an opportunity to unite behind a common force, the Lebanese Olympic team.

Houlihan and Zhen argue that the Olympics give small states many highly visible opportunities on the international stage. They share a formal symbolic equality of status with the major (sports) powers most evident in the opening and closing ceremonies. In international sport there is the ‘one nation, one vote principle’. Finally, the IOC provides small states with development funding from the resources of the OS programme.

Apart from participating in the Olympics as a sign of statehood, for countries such as Lebanon the Games serve as a tool to prepare for regional games. In regional games, countries interact with neighbouring nation-states, from the same continent or with shared characteristics. For athletes from countries such as Lebanon that are not competitive on the global level, regional games offer the opportunity to be more successful than at the Olympic Games, to be in the spotlight and to gain the social recognition they do not achieve after failing in the early stages of the Olympic Games. In the case of Lebanon there are four important regional games. At the continental level, there are the Asian Games. The Pan-Arab Games are for the 22 Arabic-speaking countries in the Arab League, and, less prestigious, than the Pan-Arab Games, the Francophone Games are for countries from all over the world where French is the mother tongue or where, as in Lebanon as a legacy of French colonial rule, a significant proportion of the population speaks the language (the Francophone Games are similar to the concept of the more popular Commonwealth Games of territories that used to belong to the British Empire). Finally, there are the Mediterranean Games for countries which are around or close to the Mediterranean Sea, and which include countries from three continents (Lebanon and Syria from Asia, six countries from Africa and 18 countries from Europe). Apart from such multi-sport events, there are regional and continental championships that take place in every sport.

While Lebanon has never hosted the Olympic Games nor the Asian Games, one of the largest mega-sporting events in the world, in 1957 it organised the Pan-Arab Games and in 1959 the Mediterranean Games, reflecting the positive developments at a time when Lebanon was called the ‘Paris of the Middle East’. In 1997 Lebanon again hosted the Pan-Arab Games; in 2000 the continental soccer championship ‘AFC Asian Cup’ was held in Lebanon; and in 2009 the Francophone Games took place in the country, showcasing its redevelopment after the 1975–90 civil war.

Gretta Taslakian, a Lebanese sprinter who was interviewed for this research, described the participation in regional games as her main motivation for being an athlete. She participated for her country in three Summer Olympic Games: 2004 in Athens, 2008 in Beijing and 2012 in London. While failing at all three Games in the early stages, Taslakian won four medals at the 2007 and 2011 Pan-Arab Games (three gold and one silver). She also won silver and a bronze medal at the 2011 and 2013 Asian Athletics Championships. Other Lebanese
participants in the 2012 Summer Olympics had similar experiences: the swimmer Katya Bachrouche won six medals, among them four gold, at the 2011 Pan-Arab Games, while – like Taslakian – she was far away from the medal ranks in London 2012, exiting the competition after the first race. The successes of Taslakian and Bachrouche at the regional level also highlight the fact that female sport is more common in Lebanon than in other Middle Eastern countries. This is also of benefit for Lebanon’s overall performances at regional games. Lebanon and Syria belong to the most successful Arab countries in the medal tables because early on they began fielding female as well as male athletes.38

While failure at the Olympics is frustrating for many athletes from developing countries, it is not a requirement for them to participate in the Games. ‘We see it as an opportunity, not a must,’ emphasised Mazen Ramadan, head of Lebanon’s Olympic delegation for Rio 2016. There is support for athletes from the Olympic Solidarity programme for a period of two years before the Olympics (monthly scholarship, travel subsidy, access to a global training centre network). The failure of athletes to qualify for the Games (or not getting an invitation place) does not affect their support from the OS programme. According to the Olympic Charter, there is only one scenario in which not participating in the Olympic Games would be sanctioned by the IOC, and this is if athletes or entire teams withdraw after having already entered the Olympic stage: ‘The withdrawal of a duly entered delegation, team or individual shall, if effected without the consent of the IOC Executive Board, constitute an infringement of the Olympic Charter, and be subject to an inquiry, and may lead to measures or sanctions’.39

While the vast majority of athletes from developing countries who participated in the Olympics failed to win a medal, there is still something they bring home from the Games, as Ramadan emphasised when interviewed for this research: ‘Participants see the best venues in the world; meet other athletes, and the Opening and Closing ceremonies are an unbelievable feeling and memory. The participation in the Olympic Games is evidence of belonging to the best athletes. Being named as an Olympian always remains in the CV and might have also career advantages beyond athletic life.’

**Conclusion**

There is an increasing gap between those countries competing for medals in the Olympic Games and those countries which are just spectators in the ‘Gold War’. While the first group is mainly comprised of developed countries with increasing government involvement in the elite sport sector, greater expenditures on competition in international sport, and the adoption of similar (best practice) elite sport policies, developing countries such as Lebanon lack such a strategic approach. While the *Ministry of Youth and Sport Strategy 2010–2020* lists needed strategies such as specialisation in the most promising sports, the Ministry’s failure to implement the strategy shows the difficulties that weak states such as Lebanon face in putting policies into effect. For them, the primary achievement is only participation in the Games.

The attendance of Lebanon and a vast majority of developing countries at the Olympic Games is characterised by small team sizes, no medals won, most Olympic athletes being dependent on invitation places instead of earning the spots by qualifying, and frequent losses in the first rounds of the events. However, there are also differences among the
countries. For example, in contrast to other Middle Eastern countries, Lebanon presented itself in London 2012 as a relatively progressive country by sending a team that consisted of majority female athletes.

Developing countries such as Lebanon lack governmental funding for the elite sport sector. They depend on external help, such as athlete scholarships from the IOC, to be able to field teams to the Olympic Games. Another characteristic of developing countries is the recruitment of athletes from the diaspora, such as the case of Lebanon recruiting athletes from the USA where three million people of Lebanese ancestry live. While the lack of governmental funding, the absence of a strategic approach and diaspora recruitment apply to most developing countries, there are also some specific characteristics of the Lebanese case investigated here. For example, the multi-religious country aims for an equal representation of Muslims and Christians, as was the case in London 2012, when five Muslims and five Christians represented the small Mediterranean country.

Rather than competing for medals and participating in the ‘Gold War’ among developed countries, developing countries take part in the Olympic Games as a ‘sign of statehood’ to gain recognition from the global community. This applies particularly to Olympic participants like Lebanon that are relatively new countries (independent only since 1943). Through Olympic participation they enjoy forms of equality with major powers in the opening and closing ceremonies of the Games, and in the international sporting federations.

In addition, the Olympic Games serve as an opportunity for developing countries to prepare for continental and regional Games, as is the case of Lebanon in the Asian Games, the Pan-Arab Games and the Mediterranean Games. Athletes have the opportunity to be more successful in those games than at the Olympic Games, and their nation-states can compete with neighbouring countries for soft power and influence in regional affairs.

The International Olympic Committee publishes performance rankings during the Olympics that are solely based on gold, silver and bronze medals won at the Games. Such a performance indicator leaves out the majority of countries (58% in London 2012, 70% in Sochi 2014) unable to win any medal. Developing an approach that gives credit to other achievements, such as the two Lebanese athletes reaching the second round in London 2012 (while other developing countries of similar size such as, for example Bolivia, did not advance to the second round in any competition) would be an opportunity to rank all those countries that do not win a medal but still achieve some success.40

Winning medals at the Olympic Games is not completely impossible for developing countries, as the examples of Ethiopia and Kenya demonstrate. Learning from them would mean specialising in medal-promising individual events, as those two East African countries do in running. Lebanon could do the same by focusing on a sport such as taekwondo, in which a Lebanese woman qualified for the quarter-final in London 2012. Ethiopia and Kenya give their most promising athletes the opportunity to focus on their athletic talent by recruiting them to state institutions such as the army, something other developing countries like Lebanon should also consider in order to make sporting success more likely.

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Notes

17. FIBA, “China capture 2015 FIBA Asia Championship Crown.”
19. IOC, “Games of the XXX Olympiad.”
20. Ibid.
22. British Tennis, “ITF announces Entries.”
23. Reiche, “Success and Failure of Countries at the Olympic Games.”
29. Katwala, “The World Cup.”
33. Stanton, “Pioneer of Olympism,” 2116
40. For an interesting suggestion, see “USA, Russia and Germany.”

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