



Viewpoints Special Edition

# Sports and the Middle East

The Middle East Institute  
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Middle East Institute



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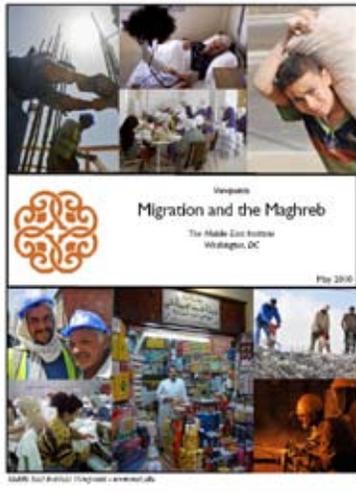
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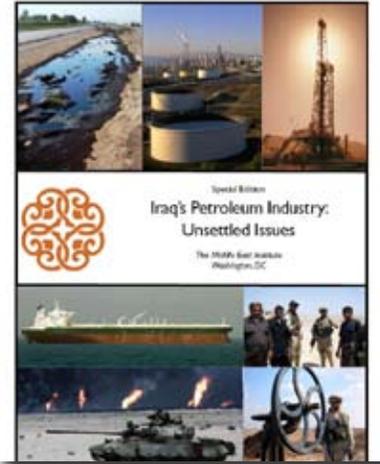
# **Sports and the Middle East**

# Recent Viewpoints



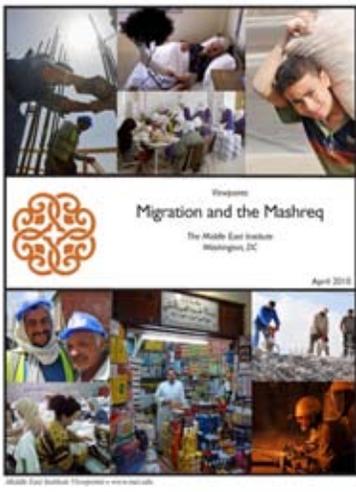
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# Sports and the Middle East

A Special Edition of *Viewpoints*

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## Introduction

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Two weeks after the release of this publication, the first matches of the soccer world's 2010 FIFA World Cup will get underway at ten stadiums (fixtures) spread across the host country of South Africa. Over a billion people are expected to follow the month-long tournament.

On June 13, the Algerian team – the only squad from the Middle East to have qualified – will face off against Group C opponent Slovenia. The attention of millions of avid soccer (football) fans throughout the region will be riveted not just by this match but by many of the others.

Soccer is woven tightly into the lives and cultures of the peoples of the Middle East. It is by far the region's most popular sport. However, other sports thrive in the region as well. Some are deep-rooted national traditions, such as wrestling in Iran. Iconic sports figures like Moroccan runners Said Aouita and Hicham El Guerrouj have helped popularize track and field in the Maghreb. In 2004, Bahrain hosted the first FIA Formula One World Championship event ever held in the Middle East. In April of this year, the UAE ice hockey team became the first from the Middle East to compete in the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) World Championship in Europe.

Sports of course do not exist in a vacuum. Sports are a part of society. Accordingly, they both mirror aspects of society and serve as powerful agents of social change. They are sources of entertainment. They provide health benefits to participants and help instill qualities such as discipline and team work. They can create sources of income. And they can be vehicles for enhancing mutual understanding.

This special edition of *MEI Viewpoints* offers snapshots of sports and the Middle East. The nine essays contained in this volume cover a wide range of interesting topics including media portrayals of minority athletes (Israel), the struggle to maintain soccer as a national pastime in the face of difficult economic and political circumstances (Yemen), soccer as the embodiment of national pride (of Syriacs/Assyrians on the pitch in Sweden and Palestinians in Jordan), female athletes and traditional values (Afghanistan, Tunisia, and Morocco), and basketball as a peacebuilding tool (Arab/Jewish youth in Jerusalem).

This collection is the first of what we hope will be an ongoing series that seeks to shed light on various aspects of soccer in the Middle East, on other sports (including profiles of individual sports figures, teams, or matches), and other facets of the relationship between sports and society in the region. Toward that end, we welcome submissions of proposed topics. Interested authors should contact Dr. John Calabrese at [jcalabrese@mei.edu](mailto:jcalabrese@mei.edu).

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# In Search of a Voice: Arab Soccer Players in the Israeli Media

*Eran Shor*

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Soccer is the most popular sport in Israel. As such, it is also a strategic research site in which to study Israeli society and its complex social and ethnic relations. One of the more interesting phenomena in Israeli soccer is the participation of Arab soccer teams and Arab soccer players in the Israeli major league, which has won increasing scholarly attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup> This essay examines the media coverage of these players, focusing on the tension between the opportunity for positive exposure of successful athletes on the one hand and the difficulty of these players to advance issues that are important to their minority group on the other hand.

Arab soccer players are an inseparable part of the Israeli Arab public. Most Jews hold hostile views toward the Arab minority, and even official rhetoric often portrays them mainly as a security and demographical threat. During the late 1990s and the 2000s three Arab teams advanced to the major Israeli soccer league (Hapoel Taibe, Maccabi Akhi Nazareth, and Bnei Sakhnin), and between 15 and 30 Arab players have managed to join major soccer league teams (both Arab and Jewish). While sport provides ethnic minorities with high visibility, research shows that this is also a field where biased representation is highly prevalent.<sup>2</sup> Still, in Israel, like elsewhere, sport is one of the few fields in which the Arab minority receives media exposure of any kind.<sup>3</sup> It therefore has the potential to provide a rare opportunity for bringing the voice of minority groups and expressing their concerns.

Within the sociology of sport, there are two opposing theoretical views regarding the integration of minority groups in sport. The first sees sport as a field that brings together different groups in society and bridges class, ethnic, and racial divides. In this view, minority sport stars serve both as role models for young people from their ethnic groups and as a mouthpiece voicing the feelings and needs of their own people, thus giving

1. Ben-Porat, Guy and Amir Ben-Porat, "(Un)bounded Soccer: Globalization and Localization of the Game in Israel," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 34" (2004), pp. 421-436; Shor, Eran, "Contested Masculinities: The New Jew and the Construction of Black and Palestinian Athletes in Israeli Media," *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, Vol. 32 (2008), pp. 255-277; and Sorek, Tamir, *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

2. Gruneau, Richard, "Making Spectacle: A Case Study in T.V. Sports Production," in Lawrence A. Wenner, ed., *Media, Sports and Society*, (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), pp. 134-56; and Hoberman, John, *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Had Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*, (New York: Mariner Books, 1997). Stone, Jeff and Christian I. Lynch, Mike Sjomeling, and John M. Darley, "Stereotype Threat Effects on Black and White Athletic Performance," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 77 (1999), pp. 1213-1227.

3. Aburaiya, Issam, Eli Avraham and Gadi Wolfsfeld, *The Palestinians in Israel in the Eyes of the Hebrew Media* (Givat Habiba: The Peace Institute (Hebrew), 1998).



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hope to their groups and advancing their status.<sup>4</sup> The opposing view holds that the sport field reflects the tendencies of the larger society, helping to maintain the social dominance of the hegemonic groups. In this view sport stars serve mostly as tokens and have no real influence on the social order.<sup>5</sup>

Examining the media coverage of Arabs in Israeli sport over the last decade puts this dichotomy into question. On the one hand, Arab athletes do receive a rare opportunity for positive exposure, stressing their athletic abilities and successes in a non-threatening environment. Jewish and Arab athletes receive a rare opportunity to interact with each other, develop friendships, and be exposed to the ideas and adversities of the other group. The Hebrew media encourages these interactions, praising what many reporters see as a model for Arab-Jewish coexistence.

On the other hand, following the media coverage of Arab athletes reveals a very unilateral perception of coexistence and the way it is to be achieved. In this vision, the Arab minority is expected to relinquish, or at times even denounce, its national identity and cultural heritage, and the success of coexistence is portrayed as if it were entirely dependent on the efforts and transition of the Palestinian side. Palestinian athletes are demanded to constantly prove themselves, adopt the Jewish culture and the Hebrew language, and suppress signs of cultural uniqueness, alternative national identities, or political aspirations and opinions.

Furthermore, the expressions and behaviors of Israeli Palestinian soccer players are consistently policed and silenced by the Jewish-dominated media discourse, effectively blocking one of the few channels of expression for the Arab public in Israel. When Arab players express a consensual vision of coexistence and assimilation, they are enthusiastically commended for it. However, when they talk about their hybrid Israeli-Palestinian identity and bring forward the demands of the Arab public, they are scolded and silenced. Both journalists and Internet surfers cite the importance of keeping “clean sports” separate from “dirty politics” and demand that the players cease bringing up issues about which they “know nothing” or “have no moral authority to talk.” These silencing practices are effective in making the Palestinian players highly cautious and largely prevent them from voicing the opinions and adversities of Israeli Arab public.

**Palestinian athletes are demanded to constantly prove themselves, adopt the Jewish culture and the Hebrew language, and suppress signs of cultural uniqueness, alternative national identities, or political aspirations and opinions.**

While contentious political statements by Jewish athletes are either ignored, or frowned upon but dismissed as insignificant, political expressions coming from Arab players are heavily policed and silenced by the Hebrew media. This policing may explain the rarity of political expressions by Palestinian soccer players. In most of the interviews with them, the players make noticeable efforts to avoid or bypass the reporters’ attempts to “drag them into talking politics.” They often claim to have no opinion

4. Carrington, Bruce, “Social Mobility, Ethnicity and Sport,” *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, Vol. 7 (1986), pp. 3-18. Coakley, Jay J., *Sport in Society: Issues and Controversies*. 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Boston, MA: (Mcgraw-Hill Higher Education, 2006).

5. Bale, John and Mike Cronin, eds., *Sport and Postcolonialism* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Hargreaves, John, *Sport, Power and Society* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1986); and Sugden, John P. and Alan Tomlinson, eds., *Power Games: A Critical Sociology of Sport* (London: Routledge, 2002).

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*Shor...*

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or pay tribute to the common view that sports stars should not talk about political issues, because they do not know enough about these issues.

The one exception to the no-politics rule is the “coexistence talk.” Positive statements that praise Arab-Jewish coexistence and talk about the contribution of sports to this coexistence are gladly cited and highly commended by Jewish media and public figures. Such non-controversial expressions are very prevalent in interviews with Arab players. Publicists and journalists see such expressions as a show of good will and use them to “prove” the claim that coexistence actually depends first and foremost on the willingness of the Arab minority to blend in. Only in very few cases the no-politics rule is breached and Palestinian players dare talk about sensitive political issues and criticize Israeli policies toward the Palestinian minority. In these cases sports managers, journalists, and fans line up to denounce the player and make sure that he is aware of his breach and regrets it. They reproach him for steering up strife and demand that he renounce his “divisive statements” and express his “loyalty” to Israel.

Interestingly, while the Arab players cannot cash in on their success and are forced to stay away from political issues, the Jewish journalists and publicists do cash in on the success of Arab players and teams. This success, as well as the very participation of Arab athletes and teams in Israeli sports, is exploited to boost a desirable political image of Israel as an egalitarian society. Thus, while the Palestinians are not allowed to mix sport and politics and complain about discrimination, Jewish speakers do mix the two spheres in order to “prove” that discrimination does not exist.

In conclusion, while sport certainly has the potential of bringing the Jewish majority and the Arab minority in Israel closer together, in most cases this potential remains unfulfilled. Arab soccer players are largely unable to bring any real issues and concerns to public debate, as their political speech is heavily criticized, especially when it is not in line with the ideal picture of coexistence.

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# Walls and Goals: The Israeli-Palestinian Encounter in Football

## Films and Literature

*Alon Raab*

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*Dedicated to the memory of Israel Tzvi Raab Z”L, a true lover of the game*

The long, complex encounter between the Israeli and Palestinian people has been examined in many cinematic and literary creations. In this essay, I will explore several that use football as a lens to read opposing political agendas and as a means to resolve conflict.

In a recent commercial for Israeli cell-phone giant Cellcom, smiling Israeli soldiers play football at the barrier separating Israel from the West Bank.<sup>1</sup> They kick the ball to the other side, and it is promptly returned. The announcer declares, “What, after all, do we all want? A little Keif” (an Arabic word meaning “fun”). The ad was lambasted by activists, who pointed to four years of weekly protests at the villages of Bil’in and Ni’lin, where soldiers often attacked football tournaments, and where Palestinians, Israelis, and Internationalists have been injured and killed. In a counter-video, events are seen from the Palestinian side of the barrier, and it is protesters who first kick the ball to the Israeli side. A title reads, “No friendly over-the-wall football game,” as the soldiers respond by lobbing gas canisters.<sup>2</sup>

These ads reflect the two faces of football in Israeli and Palestinian film and literature. Despite a variety of portrayals, two parallel narratives have developed that each side has told itself and the other about the right to the land, whose suffering is greater, and the many wars and efforts toward peace.<sup>3</sup>

There is a growing body of work worldwide about football and politics: the use of the game for political gain and the way disenfranchised groups have used it as a means to liberation. There are also an increasing number of studies that address the early development of football in Israel/Palestine, the way that sports clubs helped form national consciousness for both sides, the place of Palestinian football in the Jewish state, and the



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1. The barrier has been called by its supporters “The Security Fence” and by its opponents “The Apartheid Wall.”

2. There is a voluminous literature about the resistance to the construction of the barrier, as well as several films including *Bil’in My Love* and *Budrus*. See also <http://www.bilin-village.org/>. The two ads can be seen on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH02uc1vB4k&feature=related>. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Et8VGyCDt10&feature=related>.

3. Robert Roteberg, ed. *Israeli and Palestinian Narratives of Conflict* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

ways that the fate of Palestinian football mirrors that of the Palestinian people.<sup>4</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this work to elaborate on this rich history, but it is important to note that since its introduction in the twilight days of the Ottoman Empire to its growing popularity during the British Mandate, football was an arena of cooperation but also of enmity between the Israeli and Palestinian nations. Informal games and teams comprised of Jewish and Palestinian workers, including at the Haifa Oil refineries and among orange pickers, were common. League-based games involving Jewish, Palestinian, and British teams were played amicably until the 1929 riots ended this experiment, but matches between Jewish and neighboring Arab teams continued. Even in the mid-1940s, Jewish teams traveled to Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, demonstrating that despite the increasing antagonism and bloodletting, football remained an important arena of sportsmanship and friendship. When conflicts developed on the pitch, they often arose from intra-national struggles: between Palestinian players of differing parties and among Jewish athletes whose teams reflected sharp societal divisions.<sup>5</sup> Conflict was mostly subdued in games between Jewish and Arab teams, but intense national solidarity was shown in matches with British teams.

Since the 1948 war, Israeli and Palestinian filmmakers and writers have used football to illuminate the political situation. Some emphasize the evils of the occupation and how even the game falls victim to larger political forces. The film *Goal Dreams*, directed by Palestinian Maya Sanbar and American Jeffrey Saunder, follows the Palestinian national team's attempt to reach the 2006 Mundial.<sup>6</sup> It profiles four players from refugee camps in Gaza and Lebanon and from the far corners of the Palestinian Diaspora in Chile and the United States. Forced to practice in Egypt and conduct home games in Qatar, the team was barred from traveling to games by Israeli and Egyptian soldiers. During the 2006 football season, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) soldiers killed player Marek Al-Quto and wounded others, arrested players' relatives, and demolished homes. The film describes hardship but also camaraderie and the national pride that the team inspires in its fans. Midfielder Eduardo Abdala Montero says, "The players represent so many people suffering ... We bring satisfaction and joy to these people."<sup>7</sup>

The theme of football as the embodiment of national aspirations is common among ethnic minorities and emerging states, including Israel. A poem by Natan Alterman portrays the 1956 matches against the Soviet team as part of the 2,000-year struggle with the entire Christian world. Using the identical term in Hebrew for "goal" and

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4. These include works by Issam Khalidi, Amir Ben Porat, Hagai Harif, and Haim Kaufman. See, for example, Haim B. Yair Galily, "Sport, Politics, and Society in Israel: The First Fifty-Five Years," *Israel Affairs*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (2007), pp. 515-28; Haim B. Kaufman and Haggy Harif, *Sport and Physical Culture in Israel in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Jerusalem, Ben Tzvi Institute, 2002, in Hebrew); Issam Khalidi, "Body and Ideology: Early Athletics in Palestine (1900-1948)," *Jerusalem Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (2006), pp. 44-58; and Issam Khalidi, "The Zionist Movement and Sports in Palestine," *The Electronic Intifada*, April 27, 2009.

5. The sharp political divisions in Israeli football and society continued into the 1950s when, for a few years, there were two premier leagues in Israel, divided along party lines.

6. Maya Sanbar and Jeffrey Saunder, *Goal Dreams*, 2006.

7. Sanbar and Saunder, *Goal Dreams*, 2006.

“gate,” Alterman calls for the Israeli team to score and tear down the walls that bar Soviet Jews from returning to their ancestral home.<sup>8</sup>

Children’s films have shown football as a path to freedom — in reality or the imagination. Ramallah animators Amer Shomali and Basel Nasr’s four-minute animation *Child Fiction* states that the wall’s harmful effects don’t always “separate child from dream.” The film shows a lad bouncing a ball that resembles the world as he approaches the barrier. It topples as he plays, suggesting that the joy of the game is a powerful weapon against oppression. *Offside*, an Arabic-language short by Israelis Dorit Tadir and Daniel Sivan produced for the human rights organization Gisha, shows a boy who creatively overcomes the wall to play with his friends.<sup>9</sup>

**For Palestinian citizens, football is a major mode of integration into Jewish society**

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Elizabeth Laird’s young adult book *A Little Piece of Ground*, written with Palestinian Sonia Nimer, tells of 12-year-old Karim Aboudi, who dreams of football glory. He and his friends try to transform a field bulldozed by the Israeli army into a pitch, resulting in a battle with the IDF. Karim is shot, but, as the story ends, he imagines, “He’d go back soon, when his leg was better, and ... make the field theirs again and play football, and play, and play.”<sup>10</sup>

While the aforementioned works focus on individuals, others look at a community of players. Saed Abu Hamoud’s film *Second Half* follows the fate of his teammates from the Sazian Orthodox School of Bethlehem, starting in 1989, the last year of the first Intifada, and resuming 18 years later. Player Anton Shahin was killed, and others arrested or exiled, reflecting the fortune of many Palestinians who came of age just before the 1993 Oslo Accords.

Another work focusing on the collective is the 30-part television series “The Team,” written and directed by Nabil Shohami and financed by Palestinian TV station Ma’an and the NGO Search for Common Ground. The series opens in Bethlehem’s Manger Square, where two lovers recite Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish’s words of longing. The scene shifts to a sports club where debate flares over which game to watch — Real Madrid vs. Barcelona or Zamalek vs. Al Ahly — and spills over to politics. The series presents the complexities of Palestinian society, the realities of life under occupation, and the passion to resolve problems creatively and peacefully. Economic hardship, land confiscation, and resistance are woven into the plot. The choice to set the story in an athletic club evokes the beginnings of Palestinian sports, when such clubs were centers of culture, politics, and identity building. Archival footage shows the effects of larger historical realities, such as the 1948 Nakba, on the game.<sup>11</sup>

For Palestinian citizens, football is a major mode of integration into Jewish society, as shown by sociologist Tamir Sorek.<sup>12</sup> Several studies indicate that Palestinian fans of Arab and of Jewish teams score higher than non-fans on such

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8. Natan Alterman, *The Seventh Column*, (Tel Aviv: Hakibutz ha’muehad, 1962, in Hebrew), p. 145.

9. *Child Fiction* <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XUyAsUtWieI>.

10. Elizabeth Laird, *A Little Piece of Ground* (Chicago, Haymarket Books, 2006), p. 240.

11. Alon Raab, “Palestinian Soccer Drama — ‘Team’ Building for Social Change,” <http://www.theglobalgame.com/blog/2010/05/palestinian-soccer-drama%E2%80%94team-building-for-social-change/>.

12. Tamir Sorek, *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave* (London, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

measures of integration as voting for Zionist parties and watching Israeli television. Several documentaries about the Bnei Sakhnin team<sup>13</sup> explore the dynamics of Palestinian teams and fans in Israel. The team, composed of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish players, holds a unique place in Israeli society; when it won the State Cup in 2004, its players and fans waved both Israeli and Palestinian flags. One film shows the visit of Abbas Suan, the team's star midfielder and member of the Israeli national team, with his father to the ruins of their village, demolished by the IDF in the 1948 war. Suan doesn't express his feelings, perhaps because he and other players of Palestinian origin had recently been criticized for refusing to sing the Israeli anthem, with its lyrics about the yearning of the "Jewish soul" for Zion. What is left unsaid expresses the divided identity of many Palestinian citizens and the opposition they face, manifested during matches by racial insults and calls of "death to the Arabs."<sup>14</sup>

There are additional layers to the conflict between the nations: Several films note the interplay of class, gender, and ethnicity. These include the Israeli film *Beit Shean: War Story*, about the struggle of a Jewish team (including a few Arab players) from a poor "development town" of mostly Mizrahi residents to compete with the powerful and wealthy.<sup>15</sup> In *Vasermil*, three youths — Mizrahi, Ethiopian, and Russian (three marginalized groups in Israeli society) — band together to pursue their dreams.<sup>16</sup> *Forerunners*<sup>17</sup> follows players Sylvie Jan, Inna Diditch, and Salwa Amsis — a Mizrahi, a Ukrainian Jew, and a Christian Palestinian on the national women's team who defy long-held prejudices in both Jewish and Palestinian society against women playing a "man's game."<sup>18</sup> The short film *Bethlehem Female Soccer Team*, directed by Laura Conti, addresses the struggles against patriarchal attitudes and the Israeli occupation. Football gives the women hope and a sense of personal autonomy — sentiments shared by their fellow Israeli female footballers.<sup>19</sup>

The works surveyed thus far emphasize players' ability to overcome prejudice and the occupation's violence. Others have taken a different tack, suggesting that football can be a bridge between two warring peoples. Eran Riklis' 1991 film *Cup Final*<sup>20</sup> takes place during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon and follows the developing friendship between an Israeli soldier and his Palestinian fighter captors, united by their love of the game and of the Italian national team. It was one of the first Israeli films to feature complex Palestinian characters whose political commitments are shown not as acts of madness but of rational choice.

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**Cup Final ... was one of the first Israeli films to feature complex Palestinian characters whose political commitments are shown not as acts of madness but of rational choice.**

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13. The Bnei Sakhnin team has been the subject of four films and several academic studies. On its view by the media see Alina Bernstein and Lea Mandelzis, "Bnei Sakhnin through the Looking Glass," *Sport and Society*, Vol. 12, No. 8 (2009), pp. 1054-64.

14. Amir Ben Porat, "Death to the Arabs — The Right Wing Fan's Fear," *Soccer and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2008), pp. 1-13.

15. Doron Tsabari, *Beit Shean: War Story*, 1996.

16. Mushon Salmona, *Vasermil*, 2007.

17. Pazeet Mili Ben Hayai, *Forerunners*, 2004.

18. Roni Darom, "Women's Sport in Israel" in Haim B. Kaufman, ed., *Sport and Physical Culture in Israel in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Jerusalem: Ben Tzvi Institute, 2002, in Hebrew). and Alina Bernstein and Yair Galily, "Games and Sets: Women, Media and Sport in Israel," *Nashim*, No. 15 (Spring 2008), pp. 175-96.

19. Laura Conti, *Bethlehem Female Soccer Team*, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Y3q-ghMUn8>.

20. Eran Riklis, *Cup Final*, 1991.

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*Raab...*

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A more pessimistic view is expressed in Erez Tadmor and Guy Nativ's short film *Offside*.<sup>21</sup> Israeli and Palestinian soldiers unite to listen to the Mundial Final on the radio, but a bullet released accidentally causes them to shoot each other to death, while in the background the match commentator can be heard complaining about an unfair penalty kick awarded and the unjustness of life. In Itay Meirson's satiric novel *The Ninety Minute War*, after the collapse of yet another round of peace talks, the two sides agree to end the conflict through a match held in a neutral stadium. The winning nation will retain possession of the contested land, while the loser's people will depart forever. The book, released a few months before Israel's 2008 bombing of Gaza, ends with the opening kick of the match.<sup>22</sup>

In the late 1970s, at a time when Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations were held in secret and at great risk, Palestinian physician and PLO leader Issam Sartawi expressed his desire for peace to his friend Uri Avneri, the Israeli writer and peace activist. He said, "I know I would not come to my hometown of Acre, but my son will play football there with Jewish children."<sup>23</sup> Sartawi was assassinated in 1983. His dream remains to be fulfilled.

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21. Erez Tadmor and Guy Nativ, *Offside*, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYIxBRA5qjA>.

22. Itay Meirson, *The Ninety Minute War* (Jerusalem: Yediot Achronot Books, 2008, in Hebrew), <http://www.theglobalgame.com/blog/2009/05/israel-settling-palestinian-question-in-90-minute-war/>.

23. Uri Avneri, *My Friend, the Enemy*, (Westport, CT: Hill, 1986).

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# Yemeni Football and Identity Politics

*Thomas B. Stevenson and Abdul Karim Alaug*

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The Republic of Yemen occupies the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula. Unlike its oil-rich neighbors, Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world. Like other countries football (soccer) is Yemen's most popular sport. Football has been played in parts of Yemen since before the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and since the 1970s, the game's popularity has increased significantly.



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## CONTEMPORARY FOOTBALL SCENE

Compared to Europe, Yemen's football culture is still in its formative phase. Matches are played in public stadiums before all-male audiences. Tickets are inexpensive, but attendance depends on the teams playing. In the main cities, it is routine to find pickup games played in alleys, streets, and car parks. International matches are watched via satellite broadcast. Boys and men wear international team or player jerseys.

Most men claim a favorite Yemeni team and follow its success even if they do not attend matches. Residents of the capital and other primary cities often support teams from the regions where they were born. In secondary cities, football allegiances tend to be the local club.

Football teams represent sports clubs. The Yemen Football Association observes the FIFA division structure. The premier (first) division has 14 teams, the second has 20 teams, and the remaining 258 teams compete in the third.

Broadcasts of matches are rare even for international friendly or tournament contests, but sports information is widely available. Sports pages in most daily newspapers are supplemented by as many as ten weekly sports papers and several sports magazines.<sup>1</sup> These circulate primarily in the major cities.

The Ministry of Youth and Sport partially subsidizes sports clubs, both with cash and endowments of income-generating properties. Declining support has forced clubs to rely on donors to underwrite their activities. The most successful clubs attract the most fans and financial backers.

Although Yemen's FIFA ranking has been improving, the national team has not reached

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1. The number of newspapers fluctuates as some begin and others cease publication.

the level of most of its neighbors. Yemen participates in the biennial regional Gulf Cup competition and will host the 2011 round (scheduled for the end of 2010).

#### FOOTBALL DURING THE REPUBLICAN ERAS

Until 1990 Yemen was divided into the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen). When each state achieved independent, republican status in the late 1960s, the power of the central governments did not penetrate into the parochial hinterlands. Residents identified closely with their local groups and held only minimal affiliation to the larger polity.

The two governments — one capitalist leaning, the other socialist leaning — sought to promote identification with their political ideologies and incorporate citizens into a national polity. In addition to expanding the number of schools, the governments sought to promote national identity through media, education, and military service. In addition, the regimes encouraged the formation of sports clubs. Sports clubs have the advantage of drawing upon local affiliation yet at the same time incorporating clubs into state systems.<sup>2</sup> Both regional and national identities are encouraged. The success of these efforts may be measured in the steady growth of clubs during the period between 1970-90.<sup>3</sup>

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**The regimes encouraged the formation of sports clubs. Sports clubs have the advantage of drawing upon local affiliation yet at the same time incorporating clubs into state systems. Both regional and national identities are encouraged.**

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Owing to ideological differences, relations between the states were strained, and this encouraged separate national identities. At the same time, politicians and literati called for a unified state as a goal. This ethos of a shared identity resonated with portions of the populace.

Several times in the 1970s and 1980s the Yemens held cross-border football matches.<sup>4</sup> Official newspaper accounts fomented the idea that the matches were to heal rifts between the sides and promote the notion of one Yemen. As conducted, it was clear that each regime used the games to validate its political system. Spectators tended to adopt the official line and hung banners in support of unification. Although these contests were a form of sports diplomacy, the efforts were not sustained beyond a few years.

#### FOOTBALL IN UNITED YEMEN

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2. This paradoxical outcome was first described by Janet Lever, *Soccer Madness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

3. See Thomas B. Stevenson, "Sports Clubs and Political Integration in the Yemen Arab Republic," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1989), pp. 299-313 and Thomas B. Stevenson and Abdul Karim Alaug, "Football in Yemen: Rituals of Resistance, Integration and Identity," *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (1997), pp. 251-265.

4. See Thomas B. Stevenson and Abdul Karim Alaug, "Sports Diplomacy and Emergent Nationalism: Football Links between the Two Yemens, 1970-1990," *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2008), pp. 1-19.

In 1990 the two Yemens united to form the Republic of Yemen. While unification was portrayed as a blending of coequal states, union was not a genuine joining of comparable partners. The former North Yemen had about twice the population of the former South Yemen. Both countries were in serious fiscal straits; the financial status of South Yemen, whose Soviet benefactors had withdrawn, was especially critical.

After years of perceiving the other side as the enemy, the united government needed to create the illusion that all citizens shared the same identity and would be treated equally. Parity in government posts was demonstrated by merging their respective parliaments and ministries, insuring that the highest posts were distributed evenly between persons from the former countries. The most visible effort to portray equity was the first combined football season.

Ministry of Youth and Sport officials believed extensive competitions would promote identification with the new state. An editorial in *ar-Riyadah*, a sports newspaper, stated “The first national football championship represents an effective means of enhancing the national unity among Yemeni youth.”<sup>5</sup>

Ministry of Youth and Sport officials used the first football season as one to classify teams in new divisions. Additional teams were selected to insure that both sides were equally represented. Thirty-two teams, each playing seven home and seven away matches, contested for the national title in a year-long tournament.

About midway through the season, *ar-Riyadah* reiterated the tournament’s significance:

One of the positive aspects of the first unified football championship is that it represents the first occasion in which teams from the formerly two Yemens compete in one tournament. Thus, youth from [the north] meet with their counterparts from [the south]. This marvelous opportunity comes as a natural extension of the unity of the homeland and people.<sup>6</sup>

In a final bit of symbolism the championship game was played on the anniversary of unification.

The effort to promote a new national identity was evident in the selection of the national team. When the team’s members were announced, each former state was represented by 16 players. In the press, the roster alternated between a player from the north and the south. There was an assistant coach from each state. During matches, the team captaincy alternated.

Both the tournament and the national team actions were intended to demonstrate the government’s stated goal for unification — the recreation of the historic state — and so encourage citizens to identify

5. *ar-Riyadah* (Sports Newspaper, Sana’a), Number 24, November 4, 1990, p. 7.

6. *ar-Riyadah*, Number 44, March 24, 1991, p. 6.

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**The effort to promote a new national identity was evident in the selection of the national team. When the team’s members were announced, each former state was represented by 16 players.**

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themselves with the newly created nation.

It is impossible to measure the long-term success of these efforts because conflicts between the political leaders resulted in an attempt at secession in 1994. For many Yemenis the wounds created by that conflict have not healed.

#### *CONCLUSION*

Football remains an important pastime, but Yemen's crumbling economy and political instability have dominated daily life for the last several years. Yemen's first-ever victory over Bahrain in January went almost unnoticed. Citizens will be elated to host the Gulf Cup later this year — unless security concerns force its relocation — and their sense of identity will be reinforced, especially if their team wins a few matches in its first year in the tournament.

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# Assyrians or Syrians? Middle Eastern Identity Formation through Football in Sweden

*Carl Rommel*

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It is the last Sunday in May 2009, and people in Södertälje — a small industrial town, half an hour's drive southwest of the Swedish capital Stockholm — are enjoying the first hot day of the summer. It is also the day of the biggest football match of the year. Later in the afternoon, Södertälje's two second division rivals, Assyriska FF and Syrianska FC, will clash. In the hours before kick-off, one sees flags and matching shirts everywhere, either in the white and red colors of Assyriska or in the red and yellow representing Syrianska.

Emotionally tense local derby games are common in Sweden. Yet, the one in Södertälje is special, because in a sense, it is actually a Middle Eastern event taking place in Sweden. For instance, the language most commonly spoken during the fans' last preparations of chanting, boozing, and burning tires in one of Södertälje's industrial estates is not Swedish, but *Suryoyo*, a Semitic language supposedly related both to the old Aramaic that Jesus once spoke and to the language spoken in the ancient Assyrian empire.

Later — at the stadium packed with 8,000 fans from all over Sweden, as well as from Denmark, Germany, and Holland — all of the symbols and chants are in one way or another related to the history of a former homeland in the Levant; Assyriska FF fans with tattoos of the Assyrian god Ashur on their arms; Syrianska supporters exposing Syrian Orthodox crucifixes and Syriac script on their bare upper bodies in the hot afternoon sun; a huge flag rolled down over the main terrace, portraying a medieval Patriarch; a sword symbolizing the genocide of Assyrians in 1915; and an image of the Ishtar Gate in Babel. Why is this happening *here*, in Södertälje in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century? How can we make sense of the things these fans say, do, and reflect?

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What happens at and around the football stadium in Södertälje cannot be understood outside the historical context of a Christian people, which in their own language call themselves *Suryoye*. As a consequence of a long history of religious and political



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persecution,<sup>1</sup> many *Suryoye* came to leave their homelands in Turkey, Syria, and Iraq in the 1960s and 1970s. A majority of them settled in Sweden, a large number of whom ended up in Södertälje.<sup>2</sup> Soon, a conflict developed within the diaspora. Some *Suryoye* were not satisfied with the Swedish label “Assyrier” (Assyrians), used by the Swedish authorities and an influential group of secular leaders within the community alike. For these critics, the name Assyrier was problematic because it referred to a pagan Assyrian empire to which they felt no connection and because it ignored those *Suryoye* traditions that for the previous 2,000 years had been tied to the Syrian-Orthodox Church. In the mid-1970s, this tension developed into the so-called “name conflict” within the community. An *Assyrian* faction, who, generally, were more secular and liked to depict the time of the Assyrian kingdom in the pre-Christian era as the *Suryoyo* golden age,<sup>3</sup> were set against the *Syriacs*, who placed a bigger emphasis on their Syrian-Orthodox identity, and portrayed themselves as related to the Aramaic people.<sup>4</sup> As a result of this conflict, which persists, *Suryoye* today have parallel institutions in a wide range of fields, including an Assyrian and a Syriac National Association, as well as an Assyrian and a Syriac youth organization. The Syrian-Orthodox Church has two bishops and two separate churches in Södertälje. And, of course, there are the two football teams.

Assyriska FF (AFF), established in 1974, is the oldest and historically most successful of the two clubs. Since then, the team has been long established in the Swedish second division. It has played one Swedish Cup Final (2003), and played one season in the first division (2005). The other team, Syrianska FC (SFC), was established in 1977, and has been mostly one step behind Assyriska in its ascension through the Swedish league system. However, in 2008 SFC was promoted to the second division, where it now plays together with AFF at a shared stadium. Until recently, both teams had been part of the Assyrian and Syriac societies respectively. But for the past few years, they have been run independently of other *Suryoye* organizations. Both clubs, however, still have boards that are all *Suryoye*, and an overwhelming majority of their supporters are also from within the diaspora. With respect to players and coaches, the clubs have no rules regarding ethnicity, and both squads of players today are truly multicultural.

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When representatives from the two clubs are asked to explain how two football teams in the rather non-glamorous Swedish second division can make *Suryoye* families travel for many hours to home and away games, and how it can

1. See U. Björklund, *North to Another Country: the Formation of a Suryoyo community in Sweden* (Stockholm: Department of Social Anthropology, University of Stockholm, 1981), p. 18f and Z. Yalcin, “Folk-mord och identitet: Assyrier/syrianer och folk-mordet under första världskriget,” in Gunner, G. and S. Halvardson, eds., *Jag behöver rötter och vingar: om assyrisk/syriansk identitet i Sverige* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma bokförlag, 2005).

2. See G. Gunner, “Assyrier/syrianer — en orientering” in G. Gunner and S. Halvardson, eds., *Jag behöver rötter och vingar: om assyrisk/syriansk identitet i Sverige* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma bokförlag, 2005).

3. See, for example, Y. Qashisho, “Vi är assyrier historiskt, geografiskt, språkligt och kulturellt,” *Hujådå*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1983).

4. B. Knutsson, *Assur eller Aram: språklig, religiös och nationell identifikation hos Sveriges assyrier och syrianer* (Norrköping, Stockholm: Statens invandrarverk (SIV), Statens kulturråd, 1982).

be that people all around Sweden and even as far away as Australia and California regularly follow the teams' progress through the internet,<sup>5</sup> they like to refer to FC Barcelona's slogan *més que un club* (more than a club). Like FC Barcelona for the Catalans, AFF and SFC represent not only a city or a region (as do ordinary Swedish football clubs), but are in fact clubs of and for *a people* and hence so much more important. Another phrase that is often used as Assyrians and Syrians talk about the importance of their clubs is "a national team for a people without a nation." As scholars such as Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm have taught us, nations are never primordial, nor in any way essential, but rather "imagined communities" with "invented traditions." Consequently, national identities are malleable and in a constant state of flux.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, this non-stable nature of all "national" identity positions becomes even more pronounced in diasporic settings, and in particular in a situation such as the one *Suryoye* live in, where there is no pre-determined national narrative relating to a geographically and politically well-defined nation-state. Instead, *Suryoye* in Sweden have, in a sense, "started afresh" in their effort to construct a unified narrative about whom they are and where they come from. It is in this context that the name conflict between Syrians and Assyrians has developed, and it is also here that the competing "national" football clubs have to be located in order to be properly understood.



An important aspect of football as a cultural phenomenon is that it is by definition competitive. Consequently, football in Södertälje facilitates an abundance of settings for articulation of *Suryoye*'s contested history, i.e. for being Assyrian *and not* Syriac, Syriac *and not* Assyrian. The chants, flags, and tattoos shown at the stadium are great examples of how this is played out.<sup>7</sup> Another example are the numerous articles about the clubs that suddenly appeared in the national press in the days ahead of the derby. In these articles, one Assyrian and one Syriac supporter were typically asked to explain the difference between the two groups. If only for a brief period of time at the end of May 2009, football thus managed to make an intra-diasporic debate between opposing perceptions of *Suryoye* history visible to a nationwide audience. Arguably, this attention from the outside made the tension between the two sides even stronger, and it probably contributed to the perception of the derby game not only as a battle between two football teams, but also as a clash between two ways of understanding who the *Suryoye* actually are and should be.



Suryoye football is, however, not only important for the construction of *Suryoye* iden-

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5. The most important site for discussions about the clubs and the games are the chat forums on the Swedish platform Svenska Fans. Assyriska FF's site is to be found on <http://www.svenskafans.com/fotboll/assyriska/> Syrianska FC's on <http://www.svenskafans.com/fotboll/syrianska/>. For the international attention, see e.g. <http://assyriska.theoffside.com/>, a blog about Assyriska FF written about an American and one Australian. Articles and match reports were posted regularly up until January of 2010, when the blog was discontinued.

6. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006) and E.J. Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in E.J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

7. The various articulations of historical narratives at the stadium are good examples of those "commemorative ceremonies" that Paul Connerton identifies as necessary in the construction of collective social memory in *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

tities because of the historical symbols and narratives that are explicitly articulated on the terraces and in the press. As Judith Butler convincingly argues, identities are most of all crafted through mundane practices and utterances that people perform *repetitively*,<sup>8</sup> and football is literally loaded with such repetitive occasions for expressing Syriac or Assyrian identities. The repetitiveness of the games, where people (mostly men) of all ages, from various parts of Sweden simultaneously come together to watch a team that they, as a people, have in common, is perhaps the most obvious example. Yet, it is probably as important to take into consideration how football, quite automatically, names young *Suryoye* boys as *either* Syriacs *or* Assyrians: either you are given a white and red AFF shirt or you dress in yellow and red; either you wave an Assyrian flag symbolizing the two rivers of Mesopotamia, or you fly the Syriac Eagle. What is not possible, however, is to be interested in football and not stand on any side at all; given the importance of football in many young boys' lives, the chances of ending up in-between are therefore slim.

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Football in Södertälje in general and the Södertälje derby in particular, is in other words contested terrain both in words and in action. Two versions of a diasporic nationalism — Syriac and Assyrian — are here set against each other, on the pitch as well as on the terraces and in the media writing about the game. The derby game is thus one of many contests in an ongoing struggle about identity, history, and belonging. Yet, in contrast to other aspects of the “name conflict,” a football match, due to its strict regulation, can select a winner and a loser. On this sunny Sunday in May 2009, it was Syrianska FC and its supporters who came out on top (1-0). That day and the night that followed, the Syriac version of *Suryoye* nationalism thus ruled in Södertälje, and it was the Syriac national team and the Syriac people who got an opportunity to throw a party with a lot of singing, dancing, and drinking for fans and players. The party was held in a large hall owned by the church used by the Syriacs. During the festivities, one of the priests allegedly joined for a period of time, and some people even claim that the bells in the church next door were rung as part of the celebrations. For many Assyrians, this was a cause for outrage, since from their perspective, *Suryoye* nationalism — and as a consequence, *Suryoye* football — should be separated from religion. Yet, for many Syriacs, neither the location of the party nor the involvement of the priest was seen as problematic (no one had heard the church bells). Rather, it was considered quite natural to associate the celebrations with the religion, because in their Syriac view of what *Suryoye* nationalism is and should be, the people and the Church have always been inseparable — as should *Suryoye* football.

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8. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, London: Routledge, 1999).

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# Al-Wihdat: The Pride of the Palestinians in Jordan

Dag Tuastad

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“*Wahid, itnen, talagha ya Abu Hussein*” (One, two, divorce her Abu Hussein), Al-Faisali supporters sing, as their soccer team plays against Al-Wihdat.<sup>1</sup> Al-Faisali is the club associated with ethnic Jordanians, while Al-Wihdat is the club of the Palestinians. Queen Rania of Jordan is of Palestinian descent, so Al-Faisali supporters sing to have the Jordanian King divorce her, and by implication to have Jordan separated from Palestine and the Palestinians.<sup>2</sup> Jordan has largely avoided communal unrest since the civil war in 1970. But when Al-Wihdat plays against Al-Faisali, it is as if the civil war is fought all over again.



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## THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF ETHNIC TENSIONS IN JORDAN

At the break-up of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I, Jordan became part of the British Mandate of Palestine. A quarter of the territory of Palestine east of the Jordan River then known as “Transjordan” became an independent state in 1946. In 1948, after the first Arab-Israeli war, Jordan also controlled the West Bank east of Israel and west of the Jordan River. Jordan did not annex the West Bank, but its Palestinian residents nonetheless were granted Jordanian citizenship. As a result of controlling the West Bank and becoming host to nearly half a million Palestinian refugees, Jordan’s population tripled.<sup>3</sup>

The Palestinian refugees who arrived in 1948 were poor, traumatized, and embittered by the Arab states’ failure to conquer more territory of historical Palestine in the 1948 war.<sup>4</sup> On the other side the indigenous Transjordanian East Bankers saw their country threatened by the massive influx of Palestinians. The East Bankers controlled the army, police, and government, which discriminated against the refugees and kept them under close surveillance. An additional aspect of Palestinian-Jordanian tensions was the presence of another group of Palestinians in Jordan — a more educated and more affluent group of urban origin that came to dominate the private sector of the Jordanian economy. Ethnic Jordanians envied the better-off Palestinians. Many refugees would claim that such envy is the reason for ethnic Jordanian hostility toward and discrimination against them. Apparently, it is this ethnic hostility that sometimes implodes when Al-Wihdat

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1. J. Montague, *When Friday Comes: Football in the War Zone* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2008), p. 284.

2. J. Montague, *When Friday Comes*, p. 284.

3. P. Robins, *A History of Jordan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), p. 82.

4. P. Robins, *A History of Jordan*, p. 82.

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plays Al-Faisali.

#### *THE 2009 UNREST*

The election of a new right-wing government in Israel in January 2009 has aggravated ethnic tensions in Jordan. In the so-called “Lieberman Plan” Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman argues that two peoples with two religions should live on different territories.<sup>5</sup> The implication is that Palestinians should be removed from areas where Jews live. In Jordan, this has created the fear that Israel wants to empty territories in the West Bank and Israel of Palestinians.<sup>6</sup> This has created hostile feelings among Jordanians who do not want Palestinians permanently resettled to Jordan. Allegedly as a preemptive step, in the summer of 2009 Jordan started revoking thousands of Palestinians’ citizenships. This created panic among Palestinians.<sup>7</sup>

In July 2009, riots broke out in the Jordanian town of Zarka as Al-Faisali and Al-Wihdat met. “*Wahid, itnen, talagha ya Abu Hussein,*” chanted tens of thousands of Al-Faisali fans. Chanting other slogans, they cursed Palestinians, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and Jerusalem. They called the PLO traitors and collaborators, implying that they had struck a deal with Israel to resettle the Palestinians in Jordan. Anti-riot police had to intervene to stop Al-Faisali supporters from lynching Al-Wihdat team members and their fans.<sup>8</sup>

#### *NATIONAL PRIDE*

The 2009 unrest was reminiscent of the late 1980s, when Al-Wihdat came to be a symbol of Palestinian nationalism, and when fights between Al-Wihdat and Al-Faisali supporters regularly erupted. In 1970, the Jordanian army crushed the PLO after Palestinian militants crossed from Jordan to attack Israel, hijacked aircraft, and threatened the Jordanian monarchy. Thousands of Palestinians were killed in what is remembered as Black September. The Wihdat refugee camp — headquarters of the Palestinian guerillas — was heavily bombarded during the fight. After Black September, the PLO left Jordan for Lebanon, and Jordan acted to suppress any manifestation of Palestinian nationalism.

The PLO had presented the Palestinians with a way out of the shadow of the dishonored. The tragedy of the Palestinian refugees was compounded by the humiliation they sometimes experience in host countries: “Where are your tails?” Palestinian children were mocked in Lebanon. Other children asked their parents to buy them a Palestinian to play with.<sup>9</sup> In Jordan, after the PLO was driven out and Palestinian nationalism was suppressed, national identity and the pride of Palestinians residing there was to be expressed by Al-Wihdat, the football club of the Wihdat Palestinian refugee camp.

5. Wikipedia, “The Lieberman Plan,” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieberman\\_Plan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lieberman_Plan).

6. K. Abu Toameh, “Amman revoking Palestinians’ citizenship,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 20, 2009, <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=JPost/JPArticle/ShowFull&cid=1246443863400>.

7. K. Abu Toameh, “Amman revoking Palestinians’ citizenship.”

8. K. Abu Toameh, “Amman revoking Palestinians’ citizenship.”

9. R. Sayigh, *From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p.125.

The Al-Wihdat club was established in 1956 by the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA).<sup>10</sup> In 1975 Al-Wihdat qualified for the top league in Jordan. While supporters at the arenas of football clubs in Jordan sometimes could be counted in the hundreds, Al-Wihdat matches were consistently sold out. In 1980, Al-Wihdat won the Jordanian league, unleashing huge celebrations not only in Jordan, but also in the occupied West Bank. Support for Al-Wihdat was something Palestinians could communicate in public. A special honk of car horns was associated with the club.<sup>11</sup> And supporters wore the green, red, and black with a white stripe, Al-Wihdat colors — the very colors of the Palestinian flag. At the packed stadiums where Al-Wihdat played, supporters expressed their regained honor: “Arrange the chairs, the green Al-Wihdat raises our heads,” they chanted.<sup>12</sup> The refugees were no longer the passive recipients of humanitarian aid, but fighters. They sang: “We don’t want sardines, we want bombs,” and “*shabab Wihdat, kolluhum fedayyi*” (the young in Wihdat are all guerilla soldiers)<sup>13</sup>

Following disturbances in 1986, Al-Wihdat was banned from playing in the first division and forced to change its name. Three years later, after political reforms were enacted and elections held, the newly elected Parliament promptly decided to let the refugees regain control over their club and restore its original name. In recent years, Al-Wihdat has been Jordan’s most successful football club, taking the league title — from Al-Faisali, its main contender — in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2009.

#### AL-WIHDAT AS PALESTINE

“One day, when we had no voice, Al-Wihdat was our voice,” the late PLO Chairman Yasser ‘Arafat once said.<sup>14</sup> The soccer club is an embodiment of the national pride of the refugees, and it also acts to represent their political sentiments. In 1996, the club refused to play in Israel against an Israeli team. But they did travel to Hebron, where they played before 40,000 supporters. People cried as the players entered the pitch, gathered around the central circle, kneeled, and kissed the earth.<sup>15</sup> “Al-Wihdat,” a refugee in Jordan said, “is something holy, something high. It is Palestine.”<sup>16</sup>

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10. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is the UN body responsible for administrating Palestinian refugee camps. As part of their social services, UNRWA organizes sports activities in the camps.

11. L.A. Brand, *Palestinians in the Arab World: Institution Building and the Search for State* (New York: Columbia University Press), p.183.

12. D. Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan,” Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti, eds., *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1997), pp.116-17.

13. D. Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan,” p.106.

14. D. Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan,” p.105.

15. D. Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan,” p.114.

16. D. Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan,” p. 114.

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# The Evolving Role of Afghan Female Athletes

*Awista Ayub*

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Children can learn many lessons from playing sports: leadership, self-confidence, and the concept of working toward a common goal are a few such lessons. These are all skills that, when applied in life *off* the field, can augment the potential for success there as well.

For post-conflict and developing countries like Afghanistan, athletics is a unique tool for tackling social issues in a constructive manner. In addition, sports as an instrument for empowering women and girls in developing countries has engendered increased interest and support within the international development community in recent years. While the field of sports and development is still relatively young, evidence is growing that sports can play a key role in creating a safe space for women outside of the home and even go so far as to change the role of women in society over the long term.

The objective of this essay is to provide the reader with a general understanding of the role women in Afghan society inhabit and how that role is evolving for those girls participating in athletics today.

## WOMEN'S SPORT CULTURE IN AFGHANISTAN

Historically, Afghan women have lived in a dichotomous space — the public world outside of the home and the private world inside the home. Traditionally, the public space is dominated by men with women tolerated only when made as invisible as possible, and even the private space involves some degree of negotiating between men and women on decisions made within the home.

Until the Soviet invasion in 1979, Afghanistan's larger cities, particularly Kabul, were progressive and defied the dichotomous space norm, as men and women had near equal opportunity and access to education and athletics. Throughout the 1970s, Kabul University had co-ed classrooms. Meanwhile, on the sports front, school-affiliated girls' teams in basketball and volleyball (the more traditional female sports) were prevalent throughout the city. Even though men dominated the athletic arena during this time, there was still a satisfying degree of participation of women as well — comparable, in fact, to the state of female athletics in the United States at the time, with Title IX not yet enacted.



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During the next 20-plus years, both men and women had limited access to sports. Brutal warfare dramatically changed the cultural landscape of the country. The “age of liberation” of the 1970s gave way to a period of harsh repression during the civil war of the early 1990s and under Taliban rule in the mid-1990s. Most Afghan children had no opportunity to play sports, much less receive the proper training and coaching necessary to attain a high level of success in athletics.

Until now.

Today, revived school sports and national Olympic programs exist. New athletic programs for both men and women have been established. And, in the larger cities like Kabul and Herat, sports have become an area of greater participation.

#### A NEW SPACE FOR WOMEN

Although the sport is still dominated by men in terms of rates of athlete participation and program management, athletics, for those girls who participate, has become a safe public space for Afghan girls to blossom and come into their own. Indeed, this is true not only in Afghanistan, but in other developing countries as well. According to Martha Brady of the Population Council, the sports arena has emerged as a safe space for women in developing countries to congregate and to challenge themselves in a competitive environment.<sup>1</sup>

While participation in sports has become a more acceptable female activity, there are a few caveats. Afghan sports officials take the precaution of ensuring the safety of female athletes through gender-segregated training and competitive environments similar those in Iran.

Indeed, Iran has created a model for female sports participation in an Islamic country. Their athletic infrastructure includes women’s coaches, trainers, and referees — as well as dedicated gymnasiums where girls and women can compete in a female-only environment. These gender-segregated arenas have provided a way for women to play sports, while also respecting the culture.

During my 2007 trip to Kabul, I interviewed a number of sports officials paving the road for the right of girls to play sports in Afghanistan today. Safiuallah Subat, a former soccer player and then-Chief of Physical Education for the Afghanistan Ministry of Education, shared with me his thoughts on how fast change should take place in a country just a few years removed from war:

How would it be possible, after what we went through, for women to already be out in the stadium, wearing shorts and competing while men watch along the sideline? If I take it too fast, and I do everything too quickly, then reactions will come and [girls’ sports] will stop completely. The community will stand against it and they will ban the whole thing for

1. Martha Brady, “Creating Safe Spaces and Building Social Assets for Young Women in the Developing World: A New Role for Sports,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, Nos. 1/2 (2005), pp. 35-49.

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**The sports arena has emerged as a safe space for women in developing countries to congregate and to challenge themselves in a competitive environment.**

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good.<sup>2</sup>

Though he understood and respected the right of girls to participate in a traditionally male sport, he questioned the pace of change. He asks the fundamental question that the country is facing on many levels today: Is Afghanistan ready for such rapid change?

#### A CLUB OF MY OWN

In my recently published book, *Kabul Girls Soccer Club*, I explore the events that shaped the lives of a few of these ambitious athletes. Through soccer, these eight extraordinary girls have played an active role in changing the landscape for women in society and, in the process, found themselves. Below is a passage from one of the players featured in the book, Robina, who after taking up soccer, rediscovers herself:

Now, after playing soccer seriously for months, Robina is aware of her body in a new way. Before, it was her hands that were necessary to her: to carry water up the mountain to their house, to scrub the floors, or to write out her lessons. But in soccer, they are useless. Now she's discovered her legs, her balance, the speed with which she can run. And her forehead, which she uses to butt the ball.

Before soccer, her legs and feet simply got her places, or kicked at rubbish or stones in her way. Now she knows each part of her foot intimately, the way it curves on one side, perfectly contoured to the side of the ball. She knows the strength of the broad, smooth sweep leading up to her ankles, and the dense, solid circle of her heel, perfect for pivoting.

Beyond these personal epiphanies, girls' athletics has worked to change the attitude of the men and boys too, not just that of the women. According to Brady, "by seeing girls in this new action-oriented role, boys learn about the strengths, capabilities and contributions of girls and women, which in turn may begin to reshape male perception of appropriate roles for females."<sup>3</sup>

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**Through soccer, these ... extraordinary girls have played an active role in changing the landscape for women in society and, in the process.**

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Since 2004, I have had the unique opportunity to witness the emergence of sports in Afghanistan, in particular women's soccer. I have seen the positive impact that sports has in the lives of young girls proving that they have a right to play on the fields once reserved for men and, through this challenge, redefining the current gender roles. But this change has not come without controversy, as families and public officials grapple with the evolving role of women in society today and what part sports can play in that repositioning.

2. Safiullah Subat, interview with author, July 2007, Kabul, Afghanistan.

3. Martha Brady, "Creating Safe Spaces and Building Social Assets for Young Women in the Developing World: A New Role for Sports," *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, Nos. 1/2, (2005), p. 47.

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There is still a healthy amount of negotiating taking place among the girls, parents, and sports officials about the role sports has in the lives of these young girls, and conversations such as these will play a factor in changing the role of women in Afghan culture. Equally the determination by society to overcome these struggles will ultimately have a positive long-term affect. The element of hope and the perception of possibility will ensure that the sports arena becomes a permanent space for women. These young girls are now playing not only for themselves, but also for generations of women to come.

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# Tradition Trumps Sport: A Female Wrestler Retreats

Hana Askren

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The 20<sup>th</sup> century has yielded new and expanding arguments for increasing sports opportunities for women and girls. From Title IX to the Women's Sports Foundation, the importance of women's access to sports has received a great deal of attention from academia, the media, and the non-profit circuit. While I agree that women should have access, and that our opportunities lag far behind those of men, I do not agree with the social and political promises of change made by some of these programs.

## SPORT THREATENS TRADITIONAL VALUES

The debates around Title IX and other initiatives spawned vociferous arguments that if nations developed infrastructure and provided monetary support for girls to play soccer, rowing, basketball, or any number of other sports, these women would see social and cultural improvements in their lives. These improvements were not limited to health but extended to gender stereotyping, self confidence, and the ability to resist traditional gender-based restrictions. A 2006 report from The International Working Group on Women in Sports states that expanding sports opportunities to women will “help women and girls overcome social and personal barriers...”<sup>1</sup>

Some arguments have placed particular emphasis on Muslim countries, where women have often struggled against traditional restrictions. Leila Sfeir traces these developments in her paper “The Status of Muslim Women in Sport: Conflict between Cultural Tradition and *Modernization*.”<sup>2</sup> While she states that traditional customs such as veiling and “early marriage and household responsibilities” contribute to “blocking women's opportunities in sport,”<sup>3</sup> leading to fewer opportunities for Muslim women to compete at elite levels, she automatically assumes that sport is “a major innovative force and a serious threat to traditional values.”<sup>4</sup>

This kind of rhetoric creates the subtext for a larger liberation that may not actually exist. Sport, broadly defined, is not neutral and will be subordinated to stronger and



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1. Sheila Robertson, “From Montreal to Kumamoto — Women and Sport Progress Report 2002-2006,” *International Working Group on Women and Sport*, March 30, 2010, [http://www.iwg-gti.org/uploads/media/From\\_Montreal\\_to\\_Kumamoto\\_e.pdf](http://www.iwg-gti.org/uploads/media/From_Montreal_to_Kumamoto_e.pdf).

2. Leila Sfeir, “The Status of Muslim Women in Sport: Conflict between Cultural Tradition and *Modernization*,” *International Review for Sociology of Sport*, Vol 20, No. 4 (1985), pp. 283-304.

3. Leila Sfeir, “The Status of Muslim Women in Sport: Conflict between Cultural Tradition and *Modernization*,” pp. 298, 296.

4. Leila Sfeir, “The Status of Muslim Women in Sport: Conflict between Cultural Tradition and *Modernization*,” p. 301.

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more longstanding cultural norms. While sport indisputably carries benefits for both genders, one cannot expect that the introduction of opportunities for women to play sports will threaten traditional values, improve gender equity, or lead to more social freedoms for women or increased participation in the public sphere in the long term. The United Nations (UN) Sport Development and Peace website says of its Sport for Development and Peace programs that “The positive potential of sport does not develop automatically...”<sup>5</sup> Gender-based cultural practices are often stronger than this “positive potential,” and change, positive or negative, will not be linear.

#### COMPETITION ENDS WITH MARRIAGE

I developed this theory after conversations I had with a Muslim woman wrestler while I was in Baku, Azerbaijan competing at the 2007 Freestyle Wrestling World Championships. During the pre-tournament training days, I trained with women from many different countries, but Tunisian wrestler Mariam and I had a language in common (French). I asked her to tell me about herself. Mariam spoke to me about her life and aspirations. I have changed her name to protect her identity.

Mariam was young — about twenty years old — and had reached the elite level of sport through hard training with her national team. Mariam said she loved wrestling, which she found to be a very energizing sport, and didn’t mind wearing skintight singlets or training with male coaches. As Olympic hopefuls, she and I shared the same dreams and aspirations, and both of us knew that years of hard work lay ahead if we were to achieve those dreams.

She had followed her older sister’s footsteps in entering the sport. Her sister had competed for some years, but at age twenty-six married and stopped wrestling. I said it was a shame that she stopped competing and asked Mariam if her sister missed it. Mariam told me that her sister was happy she had married and quit sports, and had become a devout Muslim. Her sister prayed and covered her hair. Mariam hoped to follow in her footsteps.

Was Mariam’s family upset that Mariam herself did not give up wrestling? Did they want her also to marry and stop wearing singlets in public? Mariam replied that they were not upset, and wanted her to enjoy her youth before she too was married and became religious. Mariam knew it took a lot of strength to be a devout Muslim and hoped she would have the fortitude when the time came to begin her religious life away from the sport — because as she saw it, it was only a matter of time.

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**One cannot expect that the introduction of opportunities for women to play sports will threaten traditional values, improve gender equity, or lead to more social freedoms for women or increased participation in the public sphere in the long term.**

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Mariam’s aspirations to religious life easily trumped her athletic aspirations. If she does quit wrestling in the next few years, she will have to choose between her athletic aspirations and her religious aspirations. 5. United Nations, “Why Sport?” *United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace*, March 28, 2010, <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/sport/cache/offonce/home/sport;jsessionid=8F679FB2526D5E82C71E690EFBFDA705>.

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years, she will not likely achieve her athletic goals and will retreat substantially from the public eye. Few twenty-year-olds earn world medals; it takes years to condition and weather an athlete. Women in every culture have forgone or delayed marriage in order to have many unbroken years of training. Most athletes only hope for a World or Olympic medal.

Why would a young woman who aspires to a religious life participate in a sport in which she cannot cover up and which puts her centrally in the public sphere? And why would she aspire to elite levels if she knew she could not continue past a certain age? The way Mariam saw it, the athletic stage of her life was naturally limited and short. The sport will undoubtedly make a mark on her health and fitness, and perhaps on her worldliness and experience, but it would seem to have made no difference in her conformity with her society's expectations. While sports liberationists would argue that the sport should have emancipated her from the confines of her religion and culture, the culture of her parents and their parents will ultimately trump the temporary freedom of her wrestling career.

#### THE NEED FOR FURTHER STUDY

Further study is required to examine the persistent dominance of religious-cultural gender identities over secular athletic identities, especially in male-dominated sports. Was it an act of cultural defiance for Mariam to choose a wrestling career in the international spotlight, grappling in the presence of male coaches and spectators? She seems reconciled with her future, having already fixed it in her mind. Is it possible that later on, she will reject passive religious womanhood or parts of it? Was she playing out the female apologetic<sup>6</sup> by reassuring me that she would eventually make herself fit the standard female mold?

Mariam's inner motivations notwithstanding, my conversation with her affirms that a sport such as wrestling, perceived as overly masculine, unsuitable for women, and irreligious, can be practiced alongside deeply rooted religious traditions. It can coexist with traditional conceptions of femininity and family without undermining them or causing women to challenge their traditional roles or take on male roles in the community. This should assuage the fears of some Muslim critics who have argued that allowing women to become athletes will damage their religiosity and femininity.

At the same time, a formal academic study of the compatibility or conflict between the "sporting woman" with the "religious, married female," could uncover their points of commonality. So far, these identities have been seen as only conflicting, and a large-scale, detailed qualitative study is necessary to outline a more complex interaction. I believe sport can, and does, change women's lives for the better, but the twin powers of culture and religion can mitigate change.

Such a study could assist those planning "rescue by sport" to design more effective projects. But more importantly, it

**A sport such as wrestling ... can be practiced alongside deeply rooted religious traditions. It can coexist with traditional conceptions of femininity and family without undermining them**

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6. The "female apologetic" is an overt display of femininity or heterosexuality in an attempt to counter stereotypes of masculinity.

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may transform the field on a deeper level by exposing the complex ways that women integrate their athletic experience and by bringing a large body of real athletes' experiences into the literature. By studying religious women's orientation toward athletic achievement, we can question the assumed connection between "masculine" sports and the rejection of conventional femininity, expanding all assumptions made by scholars about women, sports, and tradition.

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# The Development of Women's Football in Morocco

*Nicole Matuska*

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Several months ago on a Tuesday afternoon, a local girls football team was practicing on a dirt field in Sidi Moumen, a notorious 350,000-person shantytown on the outskirts of Casablanca, Morocco. A crowd of boys had gathered along the fence. One of the boys began making comments. "Look at her touch on the ball," he mumbled to his friend, "where did she learn to play football?" "My five-year old brother has better control," shot back the other, slapping his friend's hand and laughing.

Saida Salah, a 37-year-old physical education teacher who began playing football in the early 90s, confessed that fifteen years ago the boys would have been calling these girls prostitutes, unclean, and boys. What is significant here is the nature of the comments. These days, they don't seem to criticize the girls playing football but the way they play. This exchange is indicative of the changing attitudes of Moroccan society towards female football players. What was once looked down upon has now, more or less, been normalized. These changes can be felt across the Arab world just by looking at the increase in opportunities, tournaments, and women's national and club teams.

Sahar El-Hawari, a pioneer in women's football in Egypt, organized the first unofficial women's Arab tournaments in 1997 and 2001. The Arab Football Federation organized the first official Women's Arab Cup in Egypt in 2006.<sup>1</sup> Even a Palestinian women's team participated in the tournament.<sup>2</sup> Jordan's women's national team has been successful in Asian tournaments since the late 1990s. More and more media attention has been placed on struggling women's programs in areas such as Palestine, Turkey, and the Kurdish regions of Iraq.<sup>3</sup>

Long gone are the days of invoking Islam to prevent young women from playing the sport. In fact, there is little resistance except for a few misinformed or politically motivated speeches condemning women's football in the name of Islam in places like Kuwait.<sup>4</sup> This usually reflects the political or cultural situation rather than religious conviction.



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1. <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/791/sp2.htm>.

2. <http://www.tlaxcala.es/pp.asp?reference=7427&lg=en>.

3. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/7999867.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7999867.stm).

<http://www.muslimahnews.com/hijab-news/muslim-women-seek-even-playing-field-in-football/>.

4. <http://gulfnnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/storm-over-women-s-football-team-in-kuwait-1.598301>.

Football in Morocco has come a long way since the days when Salah played. In 2008, a national league was established. Today, the league consists of 24 teams.<sup>5</sup> There are also local neighborhood teams that play in regional tournaments, school championships, or at youth centers.<sup>6</sup>

But, in spite of these positive developments in Morocco, there are still unequal opportunities for males and females at the elite and youth levels. This inequality originates mainly from a cultural resistance that has less to do with religion and more to do with a general apathy towards the promotion of women's sports. An attitude of "we have done enough, girls have a league and are allowed to play," has developed among government officials and local leaders. The obstacles that young female football players face today are reflected in this attitude. These obstacles include a severe lack of youth sports programs and infrastructure affecting girls more than boys, inadequate resourcing of the women's league national team, and societal pressure directing young women away from sports and towards marriage and school.

The women's football league is one of the few outlets for these girls. However, these league teams lack the money and resources to accomplish much of anything. They receive the equivalent of \$3,000 a year from the Moroccan Football Federation to cover travel expenses, uniforms, equipment, coach fees, referee fees, field fees, etc. (FIFA provides \$30,000 to \$40,000 a year to football federations specifically reserved for women's programs.<sup>7</sup>) Unlike their male counterparts, which have sponsorships, wealthy patrons and income from ticket sales, these women's team have just \$3,000. Even the United States and European countries are just now starting to create sustainable professional leagues; these efforts build upon solid and successful youth programs for young girls. With no sponsorship or ticket sales, there is little chance for the Moroccan women's league to survive without heavy support from the government, federations, and FIFA.

The second obstacle is the lack of organized youth sports programs in general. For boys, this isn't a problem. Social and cultural norms allow them to play unsupervised in the streets at any time of the day. However, girls need organization, a coach, or some sort of adult supervision. The streets are still a very male-dominated space, particularly in the poorer neighborhoods and rural areas. It is difficult for girls to play in these spaces. A secure field is usually required, not necessarily to shield them from men, but to afford them a space that is less obtrusive and public than the streets and empty lots in their neighborhoods. Besides school sports programs, which often lack qualified physical education teachers and little time devoted to football, there exist no other organized options for young girls who want to play. When asked why they won't let their daughters play football, many parents I interviewed in Sidi Moumen looked at me, surprised by my question. "It's not that they prohibit their daughters from playing," they answered, "but where? They need a team. They cannot just play with boys on the streets. Where is the coach in charge?"

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**Long gone are the days of invoking Islam to prevent young women from playing the sport.**

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5. <http://www.lamarocaine.com/accueil/905-football-feminin-demarrage-du-championnat-le-1er-novembre.html>.

6. First league men's teams are now required by the Fédération Royale Marocaine de Football to have a women's team.

7. <http://biladi.ma/forums/actualites-maroc/22566-football-feminin-le-championnat-sous-le-signe-du-report-et-du-mecontentement.html>.

The lack of space to play football is another obstacle. Like in many countries in Africa and throughout the world, the spirit of football in Morocco lives in the streets — where players are born, where the ball never bounces the right way, where the tilt of the ground makes passes curve unintentionally. In Morocco, especially in middle class and poor neighborhoods, these spaces and streets are disappearing. Hungry developers are quickly filling empty lots with new apartment buildings. The streets are choked with cars. Dilapidated government youth centers are often restricted to the public or closed. The few spaces that do exist — usually public dirt fields — are crammed with boys and men, leaving even less space and time for girls.

Yet another obstacle is societal norms. Moroccan society values femininity. And, although many families do not oppose their daughters playing football and running around with boys at a young age, attitudes change as the girls enter their teens. It is no longer as acceptable for 18 or 19 year old girls to still be playing football, especially in rural areas or smaller cities and towns. Girls are often discouraged from playing sports. Instead, they are pushed towards schools or starting families — persuaded that football and adult life are an impossible combination.

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**There are still unequal opportunities for males and females ... This inequality originates mainly from a cultural resistance that has less to do with religion and more to do with a general apathy towards the promotion of women's sports.**

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In Morocco, girls seem to play football for a very different reason than boys do. Of course, there is the common love of the game. When asked why she plays, Ibtissam Jraidi, a 16-year old striker and the captain of the Sidi Moumen Nassim league team, replied that it was in her blood and that she couldn't imagine a day going by without playing. However, this might be where the similarity ends. Because girls feel like second-class citizens, fighting for field space and against gender norms, they don't necessarily have the same need for glory or the desire to play in Europe. The idea that football can lead to wealth doesn't really exist. There is just the fundamental need to play, to be accepted, and to have a space on the field. Whether there is a bonus after a win or barely enough money to take the bus back home, the important thing is the ability to play.

At this stage of the development of Moroccan women's football, what is needed most is a change in the way society perceives sports, particularly football. A perceptual shift must occur which changes understanding from sports as a male domain where, if athletes excel, they can attain great wealth, to a tool for development to help young women gain confidence, lead healthy lives, and counter male dominance in public spaces. This change, at least in the beginning, must come from women themselves. The rest will follow.

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# A Step on the Path to Peace: How Basketball is Uniting Arab and Jewish

## Youth in Jerusalem

Julie Younes

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*Basketball is a game where all five players need to share the ball. If it is played with great teamwork, the sum of the parts is greater than the individual. It's a great forum for building trust. A lot of the game happens with things you can't see. Communication and trust with teammates is the key. It seems to me that the same can be said of peacemaking.*

~ R.C. Buford, General Manager of the NBA's San Antonio Spurs<sup>1</sup>

Across generations, age groups, and cultures, sport has long demonstrated a unique ability to unify even the most belligerent of enemies. In Israel, a country with few genuinely integrated neighborhoods, there have been Arab footballers on the men's national team since the mid-1970s.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, several young Arab-Israeli basketball players have been invited to represent their country as members of the junior national team. It is by no means a coincidence that sport was the vehicle for these progressive accomplishments.

The very nature of athletics, particularly team-oriented pursuits such as basketball, is conducive to peacebuilding. For this reason, organizations such as PeacePlayers International (PPI) have begun harnessing sport as a tool for building relationships between people living in divided communities. Founded in 2001, PeacePlayers administers programs in conflict and post-conflict zones around the world that aim to “use the game of basketball to unite and educate children and their communities.”<sup>3</sup> In addition to branches in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Cyprus, the organization operates PeacePlayers International-Middle East (PPI-ME) in Israel and the West Bank.

The bulk of PPI-ME programming is focused on Jerusalem, a politically-charged city whose final status remains one of the central points of contention in the Arab-Israeli conflict. With the majority of Arab residents living in the eastern part and Jews in the western part of the city, Jerusalem has been described as “two islands — one Arab, one Jewish ... with a tight, almost impermeable ethnic boundary.”<sup>4</sup> In Jerusalem, schools,



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1. Chad Ford, “Hoops and Harmony: How PeacePlayers is Changing the Middle East,”

ESPN, September 27, 2001, [http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=ford\\_chad&page=PeacePlayers](http://sports.espn.go.com/nba/columns/story?columnist=ford_chad&page=PeacePlayers).

2. Michele Chabin, “Arab Players Key to Israel’s Success.” *USA Today*, June 3, 2006, [http://www.usa-today.com/sports/soccer/world/2005-06-03-arab-israel-team\\_x.htm](http://www.usa-today.com/sports/soccer/world/2005-06-03-arab-israel-team_x.htm).

3. “About PeacePlayers International.” *PeacePlayers International*. March 2, 2010, <http://peaceplayersintl.org/>.

4. Michael Romann and Alex Wingrod, “Living Together Separately: Arabs and Jews in Contempo-

playgrounds, community centers, and sports clubs are largely segregated. Despite these and other obstacles — including language and socio-economic barriers — PPI-ME has successfully formed several integrated basketball teams with members from both East and West Jerusalem. A series of evaluations conducted from 2005-07 shows that the program has positively affected how participants perceive the “other” side. In short, basketball has proven to be highly effective in fostering cross-cultural understanding among children from a city that, by and large, does not mirror or encourage this attitude.



In 1954, social psychologist Muzafer Sherif conducted an experiment in which he divided a group of boys attending a summer camp into two opposing sides (the “Rattlers” and the “Eagles”) that competed in games and team challenges. Though the boys had no preexisting biases against one another, they gradually grew to dislike members of the other team and refused to socialize outside of their respective groups, even during non-competitive activities. After creating this environment of discord, Sherif then introduced a series of collaborative tasks, which could not be completed by one team alone. For example, after announcing that a certain truck would leave to pick up that evening’s dinner, he had the vehicle pretend to stall at the bottom of a hill. United by the desire for a hot meal, the “Rattlers” and “Eagles” quickly banded together to push the truck back onto the road. Using other similar exercises, Sherif was eventually able to reverse the feelings of animosity that had developed between the two sides. This groundbreaking “Robbers Cave Experiment” demonstrated that hostilities between people can be reduced by establishing “superordinate goals,” defined as “goals which are compelling and highly appealing to members of two or more groups in conflict but which cannot be attained by the resources and energies of the groups separately.”<sup>5</sup> Winning a basketball game — which can only be done with the help and cooperation of all players — is what brings together the PPI-ME children from East and West Jerusalem.

The story of Efrat, a 13-year-old West Jerusalemite, is typical of the process that leads many youth to PPI-ME. After learning about the program during a school recruiting day, she joined a “single identity” team consisting only of her Jewish classmates. In a city where over half of children live below the poverty line, PPI-ME provides a low-cost alternative to other extracurricular activities; as a result, demand is generally high.<sup>6</sup> For the first several months of the school year, Efrat and her teammates learned the fundamentals of basketball from a local Jewish coach. Using exercises from the PPI-ME Peace Education Curriculum,<sup>7</sup> they also



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rary Jerusalem,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (1993), pp. 148-14.

5. Muzafer Sherif *et al.* “Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment,” 1954/1961. *Classics in the History of Psychology: York University, Toronto, Ontario*. <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Sherif/index.htm>.

6. Dan Ben-David, “A Comprehensive Program for Reducing Inequality and Poverty and Increasing Economic Growth in Israel,” *Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel*, 2009, [http://www.taubcenter.org.il/files/E2009\\_Government\\_Report.pdf](http://www.taubcenter.org.il/files/E2009_Government_Report.pdf).

7. Developed in partnership with the Arbinger Institute, a USA-based organization specializing in conflict resolution, the Peace Education Curriculum uses basketball drills to teach conflict resolution techniques. For more information about the Arbinger Institute and the conflict resolution philosophy that underpins PPI-ME programming activity, <http://www.arbinger.com/en/home.html>.

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began preparing for “twinnings,” or joint meetings with a group of Arab girls from a nearby neighborhood who were simultaneously undergoing the same basketball and peacebuilding training in their respective community. Like all “twinning” partners, the two teams were pre-selected by PPI-ME staff, based on factors such as age, basketball skill level, and location (geographical proximity allows for greater frequency of contact).



Efrat’s first “twinning” was held at the Hand in Hand School for Bilingual Education in Jerusalem, a key PPI – ME partner that hosts many program activities.<sup>8</sup> The event did not include a traditional basketball game, but rather was based on high-energy drills and teambuilding exercises. It was also run in the neutral language of English — with Arabic and Hebrew translations — by an American staff member. For the rest of the school year, Efrat continued to participate in biweekly “single identity” practices while “twinning” twice each month. In the summer, she competed in the annual Jerusalem 3-on-3 Streetball Tournament as part of a mixed PPI-ME team. The following season, Efrat’s “twinning” group took an important step towards becoming one integrated basketball squad. Instead of two “single identity” sessions, the girls started to practice together once each week. Over the course of the year, the number of “twinnings” was gradually increased; currently, the girls take part in biweekly joint practices in addition to regular competitive games against area schools and sports clubs. The team is led by a local Palestinian coach who speaks both Arabic and Hebrew.

Prior to joining PPI-ME, Efrat had never experienced meaningful contact with Arabs — despite living in a city where they account for 33% of the total population.<sup>9</sup> After two years in the program, she now interacts comfortably with her Arab teammates, both on and off the basketball court. Most PPI-ME participants undergo a similar transformation, as reflected in the findings of the abovementioned program surveys. Conducted by an independent evaluator, they examined topics such as stereotypes, willingness for contact, and general attitude towards the project. A comparison of questionnaires distributed before and after a year of PPI-ME participation showed that a majority of Arabs and Jews developed more positive opinions of the “other” side as a result of the program. In addition, both groups reported significantly greater willingness for interaction in basketball and non-basketball settings (e.g., attending the same school, visiting each other’s homes, etc.). Almost all of the participants — 90% of the Arabs and 97% of the Jews — stated that they would recommend PPI – ME to others.



PPI-ME is successfully bringing Arab and Jewish youth together using a method of sustained contact based around “superordinate” goals. As anecdotal and analytical evidence has shown, over time the mutual pursuit of basketball and the PeacePlayers team identity begin to

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8. For more information on the Hand in Hand Center for Arab-Jewish Education in Israel, which operates four bilingual schools throughout the country, see: <http://www.handinhandk12.org/>.

9. “The Arab Population in Israel,” *State of Israel Prime Minister’s Office: Central Bureau of Statistics*, November 2002, <http://cbs.gov.il/www/statistical/arabju.pdf>.

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overshadow individual prejudices. The use of sport has also allowed PPI-ME to fill the gaps left by other dialogue-based coexistence organizations, which tend to reach only the more liberal segments of Israeli and Palestinian society. Indeed, the widespread appeal of basketball has allowed PPI-ME to work in some of Jerusalem's most conservative and volatile neighborhoods. Of course, the PPI-ME program is not perfect and could never by itself solve the Arab-Israeli conflict. However, it does represent an important step on the path to peace — learning how to live together. It is also a striking example of the power of sport. Much more than a showcase for professional competition, sport has the capacity to unite people and to effect positive change. That is good news for Israel, a country still searching for ways to constructively alter the current status quo.



Middle East Institute