

ROUNDTABLE

Introduction: Is There a Middle Eastern Sport?

TAMIR SOREK

Department of Sociology and Criminology & Law, University of Florida,
Gainesville, Fla.; e-mail: tsorek@ufl.edu
doi:10.1017/S0020743819000394

The significant cultural, political, and economic importance of Middle Eastern sports has only recently attracted the attention of scholars. Although sporadic academic studies appeared as early as the 1980s, we can identify the beginning of a “wave” of scholarship in the mid-1990s, which intensified in the early 2000s. These studies were mostly socio-historical, sociological, and anthropological, and they tended to focus on the particular dynamics of certain countries, including Egypt,¹ Turkey,² Iran,³ and Israel/Palestine,⁴ with a smaller number on Yemen⁵ and Jordan.⁶ Thematically, this scholarship focused on nationalism, ethnic conflicts, class, and state–society relations, while the inclusion of gender analysis was the exception rather than the rule. More recent scholarship, since 2010, continues similar patterns, though we can identify the addition of three emerging trends

The first trend relates to a power shift in international sports towards Middle Eastern countries with the awarding of mega sporting events to countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates. As a result of this shift, in the 2010s more scholarship has focused on business, management, and policy.⁷ Although this scholarship is not commonly represented in *IJMES*, it takes up a large share of the publications on Middle Eastern sports.

In a parallel and almost completely separate path, the second trend is the growing recognition among historians and social scientists that sports are more than “metaphors” or “symbolic expressions” of the supposedly more important political processes that take place outside the stadium. Rather, dynamics in the sports sphere are an integral part of political processes and sometimes they take part in generating them. As Paul Silverstain puts it in this roundtable, these works are “placing what had been but a miscellaneous subject of Middle Eastern studies at the center of our understanding of the region.” More than in the past, recent studies frequently consider Middle Eastern sports as a contested terrain, where struggles over resources, meanings, and identities are constantly taking place. As this scholarship shows, these dynamics are related to developments in other spheres while retaining a certain degree of autonomy. In this roundtable, for example, Dag Tuastad illustrates how football constitutes a dominant arena for battles over political identities related to the Palestinian–Bedouin divide in Jordan, while John Blasing discusses Turkish football as a sphere of resistance to neoliberal globalization. Furthermore, whereas previous works on sports as contested terrains

examined mainly ethnic, national, and state–society conflicts and only sporadically referred to gender, over the past decade the issue of women’s inclusion and the construction of gender identities has become more central to the field.⁸ In this roundtable, Charlotte Lysa’s essay on football and femininities in the Gulf represents this trend.

The third trend is the contextualization of various case studies related to specific countries, within a broader regional frame. Numerous volumes on sports, and particularly football, in the Arab world, Muslim communities, the Middle East, or the Middle East and North Africa,⁹ have been published since 2012. These publications raise questions about the validity of Middle Eastern sports as an analytical category. Following Abbas Amanat’s question, “Is there a Middle East?”¹⁰ we should ask, “Is there a Middle Eastern sport?” In other words, beyond the aggregation of case studies, can we identify common regional dynamics typical of the Middle East region? In his recent works, including in this roundtable, Murat Yıldız begins to tackle this question and identifies common patterns in the historical developments of Middle Eastern sports. Yıldız traces the activities of educators, government officials, sports club administrators, students, club members, editors, and columnists who helped turn sports into a regular fixture of the urban landscape of cities across the Middle East. Furthermore, these actors frequently saw themselves as agents of Western modernity, and, in this capacity, aspired to transform physical activity from “fun” into a broader project of training, disciplining, and educating the self.¹¹ In other words, for these agents, sport was a weighty component in the normative and aesthetic structures underlying societies that aspire to become “modern,” and this tendency was evident in many Middle Eastern cities.

Still, future research might answer other related questions: Did the anxiety to be modern experienced in the Middle East manifest itself similarly in other regions that experienced colonialism? How has this distinct type of anxiety shaped Middle Eastern sports? In a region where governments and intellectuals have frequently identified the modern with secularization processes, what (if at all) has been the role of sport in the simultaneous shaping of both concepts, and to what extent can we identify regional patterns? What is the contribution of sport fans, clubs, or players to promoting, triggering, or preventing political revolutions in the Middle East? The growing vitality of the field is promising and in the near future we should anticipate more works tackling these and similar questions.

NOTES

¹Yoav Di-Capua, “Sports, Society and Revolution: Egypt in the Early Nasserite Period,” in *Rethinking Nasserism*, ed. Eli. Podesh and On Winckler (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2004); Kristin Walseth and Kari Fasting, “Islam’s View on Physical Activity and Sport: Egyptian Women Interpreting Islam,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 38 (2003): 45–60.

²Martin Stokes, “‘Strong as a Turk’: Power, Performance and Representation in Turkish Wrestling,” in *Sport, Identity, and Ethnicity*, ed. Jeremy MacClancy (Oxford: Berg, 1996); Cunyad Okay, “The Introduction, Early Development and Historiography of Soccer in Turkey: 1890–1914,” *Soccer and Society* 3 (2002): 1–10.

³Houchang E. Chehabi, “A Political History of Football in Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 35 (2002): 371–402; Marcus Gerhardt, “Sport and Civil Society in Iran,” in *Twenty Years of Islamic Revolution: Political and Social Transition in Iran*, ed. E. Hooglund (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002); Cyrus Schaeygh, “Sport, Health, and the Iranian Middle Class in the 1920s and 1930s,” *Iranian Studies* 35 (2002):

341–69; Babak Fozooni, “Religion, Politics, and Class: Conflict and Contestation in the Development of Football in Iran,” *Soccer and Society* 5 (2004): 356–70.

⁴Amir Ben Porat, “The Commodification of Football in Israel,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 3 (1998): 269–76; Tamir Sorek, “Arab Football in Israel as an ‘Integrative Enclave.’” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 26 (2003): 422–50.

⁵Thomas Stevenson and Abdul-Karim Alaug, “Football in Yemen: Rituals of resistance, Integration and Identity,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 32 (1997): 251–65.

⁶Dag Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan,” in *Entering the Field - New Perspective on World Football*, ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti (Oxford: Berg, 1997): 123–40.

⁷Cem Tinaz, Douglas Michele Turco, and Paul Salisbury, “Sport Policy in Turkey,” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 6 (2014): 533–45; Danyel Reiche, “Investing in Sporting Success as a Domestic and Foreign Policy Tool: The Case of Qatar,” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 7 (2015): 489–504; Nadim Nassif and Mahfoud Amara, “Sport, Policy and Politics in Lebanon,” *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 7 (2015): 443–55; David Hassan, “Sport Event Management in the Gulf: A Focus on Strategy and Promotion,” in *Sport Management in the Middle East*, ed. Mohammed Ben Sulayem, Sean O’Connor, and David Hassan (New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁸Maryam Koushkie Jahromi, “Physical Activities and Sport for Women in Iran,” *Muslim Women and Sport*, ed. Tansin Benn, Gertrud Pfister, and Haifaa Jawad (New York: Routledge, 2011): 109–24; Youstra Al-Sinani and Tansin Benn, “The Sultanate of Oman and the Position of Girls and Women in Physical Education and Sport,” in *Muslim Women and Sport*, 125–37; Nour El-Houda Karfoul, “Women and Sport in Syria,” in *Muslim Women and Sport*, 138–53; Kenda R Stewart, “A Hobby or Hobbling? Playing Palestinian Women’s Soccer in Israel,” *Soccer & Society* 13 (2012): 739–63; Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Subject Formation in Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); Itir Erhart, “Ladies of Besiktas: A Dismantling of Male Hegemony at İnönü Stadium,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 48 (2013): 83–98.

⁹Fan Hong, *Sport in the Middle East: Power, Politics, Ideology and Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Mohammed Ben-Sulayem, Sean O’Connor, and David Hassan, *Sport Management in the Middle East*; Mahfoud Amara, *Sport, Politics and Society in the Arab World* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); James M. Dorsey, *Shifting Sands: Essays On Sports And Politics in the Middle East and North Africa* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2017); Nicholas Hopkins and Sandrin Gambin, *Sports and Society in the Middle East*, Cairo Papers in Social Science (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2016); Alberto Testa and Mahfoud Amara, *Sport in Islam and in Muslim Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Alon Raab and Issam Khalidi, *Soccer in the Middle East* (New York: Routledge, 2016); James M. Dorsey, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer* (London: Hurst, 2016).

¹⁰Abbas Amanat, “Introduction: Is There a Middle East? Probelamtizing a Virtual Space,” in *Is There a Middle East? The Evolution of a Geopolitical Concept*, ed. Michael E. Bonine, Abbas Amanat, and Michael E. Gasper (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2012), 1–7.

¹¹Murat C. Yıldız, “Mapping the ‘Sports Nahda’: Toward a History of Sports in the Modern Middle East,” in *Sports, Politics and Society in the Middle East*, ed. Danyel Reiche and Tamir Sorek (London: Hurst, 2019).