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Sports and the Making of the Modern Middle East

Murat C. Yildiz
History Department, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y.;
e-mail: myildiz@skidmore.edu
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In June 2012, I walked through the back streets of Vefa, a neighborhood in Istanbul's Fatih District, looking for the Vefa Spor Kulübü (Vefa Sports Club). It did not take long for me to find the single-story building with the words "Vefa Spor Kulübü Lokali" conspicuously painted in green on one of its sidewalls. At the club, I struck up a conversation with a devoted older member about its history. According to the gentleman, it was important for me to study less elitist clubs such as Vefa because the organization's history challenged the monopoly of Turkey's "Big Three"—i.e., Galatasaray, Beşiktaş, and Fenerbahçe—over soccer.

After drinking multiple cups of tea with this individual, I broached the topic of sources. "What sources did the club have?" I asked. Delighted and proud, he showed me the club's collection of the *Vefa Haftalık Spor Gazetesi* (*Vefa Weekly Sports Newspaper*). After carefully flipping through the brittle pages of an edition published in 1953, I asked whether the organization had any sources written in Ottoman Turkish from the early 20th century. Visibly disappointed, he said, "around twenty years ago we came across documents written in Ottoman; we didn't understand what they said so we threw all of them away." Sensing how shocked and saddened I was, he explained that it was important for me to remember that the club lacked the space and resources to store the documents and that this happened before "Ottomania" engulfed Turkish society. My conversations with colleagues who work on other parts of the Middle East and beyond suggest that this was not an uncommon story.

My discussion at Vefa reveals that sports clubs have a deep history in the region. The discursive and physical traces of some of these clubs have been eliminated in Turkey and the broader Middle East as a result of neglect, state formation, and ethnic cleansing. Nevertheless, aware of such a history, scholars from a variety of academic disciplines, nonprofessional academics, and journalists have pursued a research agenda that traces the precolonial and colonial origins of sports and their role in the formation of broader processes, such as nationalism, subject formation, and popular culture. Notable contributors include Houchang Chehabi, James M. Dorsey, Wilson Chacko Jacob, Shaun Lopez, Tamir Sorek, and Dag Tuastad.[1]

In my own work I have sought to investigate the creation of a popular sports culture in the late Ottoman Empire. Exploring transformations across ethnoreligious and linguistic divisions, I demonstrate that Istanbul's heterogeneous population collectively shaped the defining contours of sports as a shared civic activity.[2] My research has led me to believe that sports have been central to the formation of the modern in the region. Starting in the late 19th century, educators, government officials, and ordinary people increasingly

looked to team sports, namely soccer, and physical exercise as a panacea for society's perceived ills and a fun pastime. From Cairo to Istanbul, Baghdad to Tehran, sports enthusiasts continued to espouse these views in the expanding public sphere throughout the interwar period. How do historians account for these developments? Put differently, what can sports tell us about the formation of the modern Middle East?

Answering these questions does not just produce more information about sports; it allows us to make important contributions to the historiography of the Middle East. Recently, scholars such as Hilary Falb-Kalisman, Michael Provence, and Cyrus Schayegh have contributed to an emerging literature on the post-Ottoman Middle East.[3] This body of scholarship shows, in different ways, how networks and institutions formed during the 19th century persisted after the dissolution of the empire. An investigation of sports can offer important contributions to these conversations. For example, sports clubs such as Vefa reveal both institutional continuities and institutional spontaneity. Vefa was established after the 1908 Ottoman Constitutional Revolution and continues to function, albeit in a more modest form, as a sports club to this day. In short, the club reveals the institutional legacy of the empire. When we expand our scope of analysis to include clubs in cities such as Alexandria, Baghdad, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Istanbul, Jerusalem, and Tehran, there seems to be an institutional spontaneity to these spaces. In other words, at the same time and without strong links, individuals established sports clubs such as the Maccabi Jewish Sports and Literary Union of Alexandria (Union Juive Sportive et Litteraire Macchabée), the Greek Club of Port Said (al-Nadi al-Yunani Por Said), the Circle Sportive in Jaffa (al-Muntada al-Riyadi), the Galatasaray Physical Training Club in Istanbul (Galatasaray Terbiye-i Bedeniye Kulübü), and the Young Men's Muslim Association in Cairo (Jamʿiyat al-Shubban al-Muslimin). An analysis of this popular phenomenon could augur new lines of inquiry into the study of the post-Ottoman Middle East.

What made sports clubs so popular across the region? Sports clubs were part of the emergence of a broader phenomenon that mushroomed across the Middle East during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the voluntary association. The creation of sporting, as well as literary, religious, scientific, and political, associations coincided with the growing popularity of the idea that men from an expanding middle class needed to fill their "free time" with beneficial and moral activities. Sports enthusiasts writing in a variety of languages celebrated the idea that it was imperative for people to create and join these spaces. For example, in 1894, *al-Hilal* (The Crescent), one of Cairo's leading Arabic magazines, updated its readers on the formation of sports clubs.[4] According to the magazine, a "new club" (*nādī jadīd*) served as a space in which "a group of Cairo's notables" could engage in beneficial activities during their "free time [*awqāt al-farāgh*], instead of wasting it in places of amusement [*amākin al-lahw*]."[5] Together, my anecdote from Vefa and *al-Hilal*'s article reveal that sports touched the lives of elites and nonelites.

Indeed, sports enthusiasts penned compelling arguments for the importance of sports clubs in magazines such as *al-Hilal*; however, these sober pleas did not guarantee the popularity of clubs. And popular they were. Across the region, Muslims, Christians, and Jews signed up to become members of sports clubs. These clubs served as

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predominantly male spaces where sports enthusiasts could work out, socialize, and have fun after school or work. In addition to being popular, they deeply resonated and continue to resonate with people across the region. My father still asks two questions when entering a taxi in Istanbul: "where are you from?" and "what team do you support?" Despite the order, it still is unclear to me which question is more important to him.

The organization of sporting events in newly constructed stadiums played an important role in the spread of sports. During the first three decades of the 20th century, soccer matches, athletic competitions, and gymnastics exhibitions served as popular forms of entertainment and displays of national strength and dexterity. Memoirs, newspaper and magazine articles, and photographs reveal that men (and, increasingly during the 1920s and 1930s, women) flocked to stadiums and sports clubs to watch matches. Like matches today, some fans attentively followed every play and cheered for their favorite club, while others socialized, flirted, and hung out in the stands. By the 1930s, sports matches had become "cool" events that people from a diverse array of ethnoreligious, linguistic, and socioeconomic backgrounds attended.

The emerging literature on the history of sports is promising. Particularly exciting is the analytical utility of investigating sports during the transition from empire to nation-state in the Middle East and North Africa. What can sports tell us about the tumultuous early 20th century? What differentiates sports from other popular activities, practices, and technologies that people throughout the Middle East were engaged in, enamored by, and described as central to being modern? How were sports different than listening to the radio, shopping in a department store, or watching a movie in the cinema? How have sports, music, and the radio converged?[6] In what ways does an investigation of these intersections offer insights into popular culture during the early 20th century? Hopefully scholars will continue to reflect on these and other questions as they investigate the centrality of sports to the making of the modern Middle East.

NOTES

[1]Houchang Chehabi, "The Juggernaut of Globalization: Sport and Modernization in Iran," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 19 (2010): 275–94; James M. Dorsey, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Football* (London: C. Hurst & Co, 2017); Wilson Chacko Jacob, *Working Out Egypt: Effendi Masculinity and Colonial Modernity, 1870–1940* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); Shaun Lopez, "Football as National Allegory: Al-Ahram and the Olympics in 1920s Egypt," *History Compass* (2009): 282–305; Tamir Sorek, *Arab Football in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Dag Tuastad, "The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan," in *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football,* ed. Gary Armstrong and Richard Giulianotti (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1997).

[2]Murat C. Yıldız, "Strengthening Male Bodies and Building Robust Communities: Physical Culture in the Late Ottoman Empire" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2015); Murat C. Yıldız, "Mapping the 'Sports Nahda': Toward a History of Sports in the Modern Middle East," in *Sports, Society, and Politics in the Middle East*, ed. Danyel Tobias Reiche and Tamir Sorek (London: C. Hurst & Co, forthcoming).

[3]Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Cyrus Schayegh, *The Middle East and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2017); Hilary Falb-Kalisman, "'The Next Generation of Cultivators': Teaching Agriculture in Iraq, Palestine and Transjordan (1920–1960)," *Histoire De L'éducation* no. 148 (2019): 143–64.

[4]Joseph Ben Prestel, *Emotional Cities: Debates on Urban Change in Berlin and Cairo, 1860–1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 179; "Nadi," *al-Hilal* (1 May 1904), 538.

[5]Prestel, *Emotional Cities*, 179; "Nadi," *al-Hilal* (1 May 1904), 538.

[6]On at least one very early occasion in the Maghrib, sports and music converged significantly. See Chris Silver, "Saoud l'Oranais – Gheniet U.S.M.O. – Polyphon, 1934," *Gharamophone*, accessed 10 April 2019, https://gharamophone.com/2019/04/10/saoud-loranais-gheniet-u-s-m-o-polyphon-1934/?fbclid=IwAR0ut7QSbWbwd8NUMzUhOqM2NjH0t4G_rKWshnboqJGrnsRjf_Xe4U8FICE

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