

Sport and Political Leaders in the Arab World

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Regimes and political leaders in the Arab World have invested in sport, at different degrees, mainly for the purpose of populace mobilisation around the one party-state's ideology and around the figure of the *Zaim*, the so-called father of the nation or the nation's architect. Hundreds of photos, covers of newspapers and magazines, can be retrieved from the archives displaying current and former Arab Presidents and Kings presenting trophies to national football teams and domestic clubs, offering awards to Olympic medallists, and honorary titles to national sporting figures. Sport was incorporated, and still, in the political affairs of countries in the Arab World either to strengthen the legitimacy of ruling parties and royal families, or nowadays to delegitimise the ousted regimes following "the Arab spring". Political leaders are also using sport as an opportunity for place branding and positioning of their country in the world's map. This is evidenced today in the Arabian Peninsula. This article of course is not meant to be exhaustive to all Arab countries and historical epochs. The main idea is to provide an account of the general trend in relation to types of intervention of political leaders and rulers in sport in the Arab World, particularly with regards to nation-state building, diplomacy, and business of sport.

Sport, the Nation's Leader and Nation State Formation

Sport practice and physical strength have been at the centre of attention of leaders and rulers in the Arab world. This is going back to early history. Arab tradition is full of stories and legends about horse and camel racings, hunting, falconry, archery and sailing, to name a few. In Islamic tradition, in the *Hadith*, the Prophet Mohamed commands the believers to teach their children swimming, archery and horse-riding. It is reported in the *Sunan* (customary practices of the Prophet) that Aisha, the wife of the prophet, said "I raced with the Prophet and I beat him. Later when I had put on some weight, we raced again and he won. Then he said, 'this cancels that (referring to the previous race)' (narrated by Abi Dawud). It also narrated that 'The Prophet passed by some people from the tribe of Aslam while they were competing in archery (in the market).' He said to them, 'Shoot children of Ishmael (Prophet) your father was a skilled marksman. Shoot and I am with so and so. One of the two teams therein stopped shooting. The Prophet asked, 'why do not you shoot?', they answered, 'How could we shoot while you are with them (the other team). He then said, 'shoot and I am with you all' (narrated by Imam Bukhari).¹

¹ For more on Islamic stance on sport and exercise visit the following link on "[Health and Islam](http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/1904/)" <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/1904/>, (accessed 4 September 2010).

It should be mentioned that physical activities were part of Arab culture centuries before colonialism, reflecting the geographical specificity of the Arab World, in relation to space, time and objects. Those physical activities intended for entertainment and enjoyment involved also exercises attached to religious festivals and celebration of seasons. Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058-1111), prominent Islamic jurist, theologian and mystical thinker, insists on the educational and health benefits of physical activities. He promoted “innocent games which children should practice after school, to avoid damaging the spirit” (Fates, 1994:26).² As an example of those physical activities that were practised (and still),³ we can cite the following examples:

- *Fantasia*, a combination of horse riding and shooting, still practiced in the Maghreb;
- Singing and dancing, such as *Tekouka* and *Gnawa* in Morocco and southern Algeria;
- Falcon hunting, traditional sailing, and camel racings, still popular in the Arabian Peninsula;
- Bullfighting in Oman and the UAE;
- Traditional wrestling, known as *Gourrara* in Morocco, and *Taabaz or Debli* in Algeria;
- Kharbaga, kharbga (in the Maghreb), games of strategy that uses a square checkerboard, known also as *Seega* or *“siga”* in Egypt.

In contemporary history and in relation to modern sport, Egypt is the first Arab country to have joined international sports organisations and to participate in international sports competitions. It was the first African and Arab country to participate in the football World Cup in 1934. The two popular football clubs Al-Ahly and Zamalek have been strongly associated with the political establishment in Egypt. According to Raspaud in the 1940s (until 1952), Zamalek was renamed after Farouk Al-Awal, for the interest that King Farouk had shown for the club, as opposed to Al-Ahly, founded by Saad Zaghloul, the leader of the nationalist Wafd Party, more populist, and a bastion of anti-monarchical and republican sentiment.⁴ As for Gamal Abdel Nasser, as explained by Mohamed Hassanein Heikal, the famous editor-in-chief of the Cairo newspaper Al-Ahram,

“He [Nasser] did not have any interest in football, yet he made sure he attends the important football matches. Nasser believed this would encourage people to attend,

² Fates Youcef, « Sport et Tiers Monde », Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1994. For more on sport in Islamic contexts see Aldeeb Abu-Sahlieh), « Limites du sport en droit musulman et arabe », *Confluences. Méditerranée*, No. 50, 2004 ; on sport practice and gender question see Kirstin Walseth and Kari Fasting, () “Islam’s View on Physical Activity and Sport: Egyptian Women Interpreting Islam”, *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, Volume 38 (1) 2003, p. 45-60.

³ Festivals for the promotion of traditional games are organised in Morocco: <http://www.mjs.gov.ma/fr/Page-32/sauvegarde-des-jeux-sportifs-traditionnels>. There are also Maghrebin meetings and Arab festival of sport and traditional games. In 2010, Marsa in Tunisia, organised the 3rd Euro-Mediterranean Heritage Games.

⁴ Michelle Raspaud, “Cairo Football Derby: Al-Ahly-Zamalek”, (Middle East and North Africa entries edited by Mahfoud Amara), in Nauright, J. and Parrish, C. (eds), *Sport around the World: History, Culture and Practice*. California: ABC-Clio, 2012, p. 283-284.

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and hence would bring more financial support and revenues from the matches tickets to provide military weapons and help the army financially”.⁵

During Mubarek’s era the strategy of bidding for / and staging of continental and international sports competitions (the last major one before the fall of the regime was the FIFA U20 World Cup in 2009) was according to Lopez an occasion to emphasize the country’s political and cultural position under Mubarak’s regime. Its (natural) leadership in the Arab region and Egypt’s leading role in “the modernization of the Arab World”.⁶

For other countries in North Africa, particularly Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, their engagement with international sports institutions started straight after their independence from the French rule. Tunisia, which was a French protectorate (1881-1956), joined the IOC in 1957, followed by Morocco in 1959. Algeria had to wait until 1964 to join the club of Olympic nations. From the start, sport was the domain of the ruling parties in Algeria and Tunisia, as well as the royal institution (*Al Makhzen*) in Morocco.⁷

In Tunisia, the head of the state, Habib Bourguiba (1959-1987) followed by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-2011),⁸ were very influential in the party-state’s strategy to host the Mediterranean Games and other regional sports events. Abbassi contends that:

“The Mediterranean theme, and the plural identity it represents, has imposed its ideological hegemony on other identity themes (Maghrebin, Arab, African and Muslim). A politically neutral horizon—neither oriental nor occidental, or it is both oriental and occidental—the Mediterranean Sea appears to be an ideal symbolic place for Tunisian identity and a basis of union between the Tunisian Diaspora and their land of origin.”⁹ (translated from French)

The impressive international performance of Moroccan athletes, particularly in football and Track and Field (and to lesser extent in tennis), gave rise to occasions to celebrate national unity against internal and external threats (i.e. the conflict over the Western Sahara and maintaining political stability in the country). The Moroccan national football team won the African Cup of Nations in 1976 in Addis Ababa and qualified four times in the FIFA World Cup (1970, 1986, 1994 and 1998), making Morocco the first Arab and African country to qualify to the football World Cup in 1970 and the first one to reach the second round in 1986. Morocco became well

⁵ Razan Baker, “Egypt, Sport and Nasserism” (Middle East and North Africa entries edited by Mahfoud Amara), in Nauright, J. and Parrish, C. (eds) *Sport around the World, op. cit.*, p. 287.

⁶ Shaun Lopez, “Race, Place, and Soccer: Egypt, Morocco, and 'African' Identity in the Competition to Host the 2010 FIFA World Cup”, *Soccer and Society*, Volume 13, Issue 5-6, 2012, p. 639-652.

⁷ Moncef Lyazghi, *Makhzan at Arriadah: Korat El-Kadam Namoudhajan* [Makhzenization of Sport in Morocco: case study of football], Casablanca, Dar Alnajah Al-Jadida, 2006.

⁸ [Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali \(R\)](http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/tunisian-president-zine-el-abidine-ben-ali-poses-with-news-photo/108002212) poses with Tunisian swimming Olympic champion Oussama Mellouli (C) upon his arrival at Tunis-Carthage airport on December 22, 2010 after he won the men's 1500m freestyle event of the FINA short course world championships in Dubai: <http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/tunisian-president-zine-el-abidine-ben-ali-poses-with-news-photo/108002212>, (accessed 10 October 2013).

⁹ Driss Abbassi, « Sport et usages politiques du passé dans la Tunisie des débuts du 21^e siècle », *Revue Politique et Sociétés*, vol. 26, n° 2-3/2007, Société québécoise de science politique (Canada), 2007, p. 129.

known also thanks to its world and Olympic champions in Track and Field: Saïd Aouita, Nawel Moutawakel (the first Muslim women to win a gold medal at the Olympics),¹⁰ Khalid Skah, Nezha Bidouane, Kalid and Brahim Boulami, Hicham Al-Guerrouj and Hasna Benhassi, to name just a few. As in other countries in North Africa region bidding for and staging major sports events has been a privileged strategy in nation state formation and international relations for *Al-Mekhzen* in Morocco. Bidding in 1994, 1998 and 2006, Ben El-Caïd talks about “Morocco’s repeated, almost obsessive bid to host the FIFA World Cup.”¹¹ Lyazghi argues that even before the independence of Morocco, sport, especially football, was the domain of the palace. This is given particular emphasis by the naming, after the independence, of sport federations as the ‘royal federations’ rather than ‘national federations’. In 1959, the then Prince Hassan II established his own football club, the Royal Football Club, which was to become one of the dominant football clubs in the Moroccan league. King Hassan II was also the honorary president of the National Olympic Committee since its inception in 1959 until 1965. Lyazghi argued that more than even before, sport was considered an infallible tool to contain the crowd, to sell dreams and to occupy the youth, stopping them from being seduced by the “subversive propaganda” of Third-Worldism, which was largely in vogue at that time, particularly in neighbouring Algeria. Sport competitions under the patronage of the King became commonplace. The agenda of the Royal Cup was fixed by the royal cabinet, particularly during Hassan II’s era.¹² Although Mohammed VI has been so far been discrete when it comes to sport, the World Cup of Clubs held in Morocco the end of 2013, which saw the local club Raja reaching the final, was an occasion to associate the success of the event with the “image of modernity and stability” of Morocco under the leadership of Mohammed VI, particularly amidst popular uprisings and political turmoil in the Arab World.

The Algerian state, following the model of socialist countries, had the monopoly over the sporting affairs, at least in the 1970s and 1980s. Fates argues that “institutionally localised, as for other organizations representing civil society which were controlled by the state, sport became an important national matter”.¹³ Articles published in *El Moudjahid* newspaper, a propaganda organ for the single-party FLN, which appeared between 23 August and 10 September 1975, reinforce Fates’s argument about political legitimation and sport. Particularly during Boumedienne era, characterised by the era of socialism, anti-imperialism, and *réajustement de la révolution*, as a break from the colonial past and Benbella’s method of government:

“The revolutionary regime in Algeria has always accorded major importance to the youth of this country. The proof is in the building of sports facilities in wilayates [departments]. This approach is symbolized by the Olympic complex of 19 June [the day of the military coup, called officially the day *du réajustement de la révolution*],

¹⁰ She was appointed as Minister of Youth and Sport from 2007-2009. Elected in 2012 as vice-president of the IOC.

¹¹ Saïd Ben El Caid, « La Coupe du monde de football au secours du Maroc », *Confluences Méditerranée*, n° 50, été 2004, p. 75–8.

¹² Mahfoud Amara, “MakhzanatArriadah: Korat El-KadamNamoudhajan [Makhzenization of Sport in Morocco: Case Study of Football]; Sport et Politique en Algérie”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, Volume 29, Issue 15, 2012, p. 2200-2203.

¹³ Youcef Fates, « Sport et Politique en Algérie », Paris, L’Harmattan, collection « Espaces et Temps du sport », 2009, p. 21.

where the Mediterranean Games of Algiers will take place (...) Those projects were promoted for a precise objective, the building of a large-scale infrastructure aimed at facilitating the promotion of sports participation for all young Algerians (...) All invited delegations, the majority of whom had come to Algeria for the first time, declared admiration for the achievement of our country. Emerging from the people, the revolutionary regime works for the people. It is within this vision that the Algerian Sport University and Olympic City of 19 June were constructed".¹⁴

Organising a major sport events, such as the Mediterranean Games in 1975, followed by the African Games in 1978, was an occasion for the Algerian so-called 'revolutionary regime' under the leadership of Boumedienne to show to the world the first results of its socialist programme for development. Interestingly, Benbella, who had played professionally for *Olympique Marseille*, was ousted one day after Algeria's friendly game against Brazil 18th June 1965 held at *Bouakel Stadium* in Oran, renamed after the military coup as 19th June Stadium.¹⁵ During the 1980s the qualification of Algeria to the FIFA World Cup (1982 and 1986) and its historic victory against Germany in 1982 was of course important for the FLN-state to maintain its supremacy and to manage the economic crisis provoked by the steady fall of Algeria's currency and price of oil in the international market.

Chedli Ben Jedid, the president of Algeria from 1979-1991, was once asked by a journalist during a political debate on TV about the sport he likes to practice during his free time. This was after 1988 and the beginning of so-called political pluralism in Algeria. His answer was tennis. His response was received with mixed feelings by Algerians: on the one hand, criticism, tennis being sport of the wealthy people, and admiration, on the other hand, as it was the first time that an Algerian president talked about his leisure time. One can argue that his answer had symbolically put an end to socialism in Algeria and to FLN's hegemony over politics and media (at least for a short period). As for today, after the political turmoil and violence of the 1990s, the emphasis is on "national reconciliation". The qualification of the Algerian national team for the 2010 FIFA World Cup, after 24 years of absence, came at the right moment. It was portrayed in the Algerian media and official political discourse, as a symbolic return of Algeria into the international scene, after more than 10 years of civil war.¹⁶ It was also explained as a legacy of the reconciliation policy implemented by the current president Bouteflika, who was also the first and the youngest Minister of Youth and Sport in independent Algeria.¹⁷ At the occasion of Algeria's qualification to the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, President Bouteflika was awarded "*the best supporter of the national team*" by an Algerian football newspaper *Le Buteur*, during an award ceremony for the Best Footballer of the Year broadcasted

¹⁴ Mahfoud Amara and Ian P. Henry, « Between globalization and local 'Modernity: The diffusion and modernization of football in Algeria », *Soccer and Society*, volume 5, issue 1, 2004, p. 1-26: 7.

¹⁵ A picture of President Benbella besides two legendary Brazilian football players, Pele and Garrincha, taken before or after the friendly game between Algeria and Brazil: <http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D9%85%D9%84%D9%81:Benbella-pele-garrincha.jpg>, (accessed 10 October 2012).

¹⁶ Rachid Tlemçani, *Algeria under Bouteflika: Civil Strife and National Reconciliation*, Carnegie Middle East Center 2008: http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec7_Tlemçani_algeria_final.pdf, (accessed 10 September 2009).

¹⁷ [A picture of the President of Algeria Abdel Aziz Bouteflika kicking a football:](http://algerienetwork.com/algerie/elections-presidentielles-coupe-du-monde-et-le-reste/) <http://algerienetwork.com/algerie/elections-presidentielles-coupe-du-monde-et-le-reste/>, (accessed 1 October 2012).

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live on Algerian TV. This was few months before his re-election on 17th November 2014 for the fourth term.

The relationship of Gaddafi to sport was more ambiguous. Although two of his sons were directly involved in the administration of sporting affairs in the country, he banned combat sports in Libya because they were deemed violent and against his vision and philosophy. He stated in the *Green Book* “boxing and various kinds of wrestling suggest that humanity has not completely rid itself of the vestiges of barbarism.” He once accused FIFA to be the first cause of illness and degradation in the world of football today.¹⁸ His son Saadi was the head of the Libyan Football Federation and played professionally for several Italian clubs, and of course, for the national football team. He was banned by the Italian Football Federation in 2003 after testing positive for doping.¹⁹

Stanton, in her work about sport history in the Levant region, provides a rich account on political leaders' involvement in sport. She explains that in Lebanon, “for over four decades, one man led this effort: Gabriel Gemayel, the founder and long-term head of Lebanon's National Olympic Committee, as well as a major figure in other Lebanese sports organisations”.²⁰ Stanton gives more details about the legacy of Gabriel Gemayel, brother to Pierre – the founder and long-time head of the Kata'ib (Phalange) Party and uncle to future presidents Bachir and Amine:

“Over four decades, Gemayel worked not only to include Lebanon in the Olympic community but also to ramp up Lebanese involvement in other sports organisations. For the Olympics, he focused his efforts on the IOC, inviting members to Lebanon on official visits and for major events like the Mediterranean Games. Further, under Gemayel's leadership, the Lebanese NOC used the IOC's official publication, the Olympic Review, to highlight Lebanese involvement in domestic and regional sports events”.

We argued elsewhere how the 1997 Pan-Arab Games held in Beirut, was an occasion for this country, as expressed by its Prime Minister Rafic Harriri in his opening speech, to re-establish its credibility within the Arab League after long years of civil war and destruction and to reinforce Arab unity against the Israeli occupying army, which was accused by Rafic Harriri of transforming Lebanon into a graveyard. Rafic Harriri used his network inside the country and in the Arabian Peninsula, particularly in Saudi Arabia, to secure the necessary funding (estimated at \$113m) to build the Sports City complex and an accompanying commercial centre, which were

¹⁸ Mahfoud Amara, “When the Arab World was Mobilised around the FIFA 2006 World Cup, ” *The Journal of North African Studies*, volume 12, number 4, December, 2007, p. 417-438.

¹⁹ For more on football and politics in Libya see *The Guardian's* newspaper article, “[Libya: A donkey taunt, the Gaddafis and a fatal footballing rivalry](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/25/libya-gaddafi-al-ahly-football-benghazi)”: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/25/libya-gaddafi-al-ahly-football-benghazi> (accessed 27 January 2014). See [the picture of Saadi Gueddafi](http://goal.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/25/a-qaddafi-son-italian-soccer-and-the-power-of-money/?_php=true&type=blogs&r=0) taken during a friendly match against Argentina in Tripoli in 2003: http://goal.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/02/25/a-qaddafi-son-italian-soccer-and-the-power-of-money/?_php=true&type=blogs&r=0. (*The New York Times Soccer Blog*, accessed 20 January 2014).

²⁰ Andrea L. Stanton, “Pioneer of Olympism in the Middle East’: Gabriel Gemayel and Lebanese Sport”, *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, volume 29, number 15, 2012, p. 2115-2130: 2116.

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seen by supporters of the project as a way to restore foreign investors' confidence.²¹ Moreover, the nature of Lebanese society favours the involvement of leaders of political parties, representative of different religious communities, in sport. Most sport clubs, particularly basketball and football, the most popular sports in Lebanon, are affiliated to/and financed by political parties.²²

In Iraq, according to Saloom:

“despite the ego of president Saddam to improve his image in the eyes of the Iraqi people (and the Arab world) and the expansion of his personal portrait everywhere as well as the printing of millions of coloured posters with his photos that exhibit his different outfits and zeal, there was no single photo of him with a sport dress.”²³

Having said this, there are rare video footage which celebrates Saddam's strength and love for swimming.²⁴ Instead, sport affairs were the domain (the toy) of his son Uday, the president of the Football Federation from 1985 to 1988 and from 1990 to 2003. He also took over the presidency of the National Olympic Committee in 1986. After the invasion of Iraq, and thus to further strengthening the legitimacy of the coalition's military intervention for “regime change,” Western media shed light on the “malicious practices” of Uday against Iraqi athletes.²⁵

Arab Rulers, Sport Business and Politics

The use of sport for development and place branding is taking unprecedented level in the Gulf region, particularly after the first Gulf war. The ruling elites and businessmen in the Arabian Peninsula have sought to attract interest from business developers and multinational operators in an attempt to bolster the local and regional economy and prepare for the post-oil era. Numerous major sports are being hosted in the region to link up the foreign and domestic multinationals, international sports organisations and mega urban projects completed or under way in the region.²⁶ We can cite for instance Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi, Dubai Sport City, Aspire Zone in Doha, to name a few.

If we take the example of Qatar, the most visible in the region when it comes to investment in sport, political observers and experts agree that the start of the Sheikh Hamad Bin Khalifa's era announced a beginning of the political process of

²¹ Ian P. Henry, Mahfoud Amara, Mansour Al-Tauqi, “Sport, Arab Nationalism and the Pan-Arab Games,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, volume 38, issue 3, 2003, p. 295-310.

²² Danyel Reiche, “War Minus the Shooting? The Politics of Sport in Lebanon as a Unique Case in Comparative Politics,” *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2011, p. 261-277.

²³ Saad, Saloom, “Baath Regime and Sport in Iraq,” (Middle East and North Africa entries edited by Mahfoud Amara), in Nauright J. and Parrish C (eds) *Sport around the World, op. cit.*, p. 295-296: 295.

²⁴ [A rare video of Saddam Hussein swimming over Tigris River](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tORmTwPQsR8), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tORmTwPQsR8> (accessed 10 November 2012)

²⁵ *The Observer*, (Sunday 2 February 2003) [“Torture of Iraq's athletes”](http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2003/feb/02/athletics.duncanmackay1): <http://www.theguardian.com/sport/2003/feb/02/athletics.duncanmackay1> (accessed 10 January 2014). See also [documentary Uday's Penalty Kick](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX1oWb1SNbk) (2003)—looking at Uday Hussein's strong interest in soccer: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YX1oWb1SNbk>, (accessed 10 January 2014).

²⁶ Mahfoud Amara and Eleni Theodoraki, “Transnational Network Formation through Sports Related Regional Development Projects in the Arabian Peninsula,” *International Journal of Sport Policy*, volume 2, issue 2, 2010, p. 135-158.

modernization in the country. In relation to sport, the policy of marketing for better international visibility took an important turn with the organization of the 2006 Asian Games held in Doha. Moreover, winning the bid to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup is celebrated by the country's political and business leaders as a historical moment for sport not only for Qatar, but for the whole region. It will be the first mega event to be held in an Arab country. Sport might be seen as the vehicle par excellence for the promotion of Qatar under the leadership of Khalifa's family. It is true that, just by looking at the wide range of sports facilities and international sports events held in the country, every year, Qatar can be seen today as a lucrative destination for sport industry.

The Qatari model of development through sport is being imported to other Gulf countries and city states.²⁷ The Royal family in Bahrain is using Formula One Grand Prix for political and business ends.²⁸ The same is true in Abu Dhabi which since 2009 has its own Formula one Grand Prix. The involvement of members of the Royal Family in the professional football league in Saudi Arabia, the strongest in the region, is highly visible in newspapers and sports channels in the Kingdom. In opposition to other sectors, football fans and journalists openly criticise the management style of the head of football federation and chief executives of top football clubs who are in majority members of the extended Al-Saud family.

The high visibility emanating from the successful media attraction around sport business ventures occurring in the region or elsewhere, including the sponsorship of international sports events by companies from the Gulf region and ownership of top European football clubs by local businessman, is also putting the region under more scrutiny by the International community. Questions are being raised about the rights of labour migrants in Qatar, the condition of Shi' a community in Bahrain, and environmental concerns, as well as the economic viability around the building of mega sports facilities. Furthermore, the Royal Families who maintain a public face of volunteers and sponsors are also an influential power in the private sector, being if not the owner, the major shareholders of some of the biggest (transportation, banking, communication, construction, hospitality) companies. This explains anti-government demonstrations in Bahrain during the Formula One Grand Prix. The event is perceived by a considerable fraction of the population as benefiting only a minority.

Arab Leaders and Sport Practice

Unlike in other parts of the world where sport is an integral marketing and public relation strategies for political leaders and rulers, to promote healthy life style and vitality, particularly useful during electoral campaigns— such as Obama playing basketball, Sarkozy jogging, or Putin's love for martial arts, to name just a few — Arab

²⁷ Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani and his wife Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al-Missned at the announcement of the Qatar World Cup. Picture: Getty. <http://www.scotsman.com/sport/football/latest/fifa-health-chief-winter-qatar-world-cup-a-must-1-3095578> (accessed 27 January 2014).

²⁸ "F1 Chief Bernie Ecclestone and Prince Salman Bin Hamad Al Khalifa Crown Prince" talk to the world's media in the paddock following practice for the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix. (Getty Images): <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/f1-race-is-force-for-good-says-bahrain-crown-prince-454696.html>, (accessed 1 December 2013).

leaders are in general less enthusiastic to portray themselves in public as sportsmen. It could be argued that sport, despite its popularity and power to mobilise the populace, is still considered in the Arab World as a domain of amusement (hence not serious). That is being said, there are however some exceptions. Having previously evoked Benbella's experience in professional football, and Saddam's passion for swimming, King Hassan II of Morocco was also a keen Golfer. Lyzaghi goes as far as to claim that many political decisions were taken in Golf court. The King once declared in *Jour de France* magazine in 1987 that his best moment was when he played Golf and the only thing that would stop him is when one of his ministers brings an important file between two Golf ball hitting.²⁹

It is not rare also to see members of the royal family in Saudi Arabia partaking in folkloric dance during religious and national festivals.³⁰ Members of royal families in Jordan and Arabian Peninsula are keen to associate their image (of modern Arabian tale) with traditional sports such as falconry, camel racing and particularly equestrian sports. In fact, Princess Haya of Jordan (the wife of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai) is the current president (since 2006) of the International Equestrian Federation. Princess Haya, who competed in equestrian events at the 2000 Games in Sydney and qualified for the 2004 Games in Athens, was elected in 2007 as the member representing the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the IOC. She serves on the Commission on Culture and Olympic Education, and the International Relations Commission.³¹ The ruling family of Dubai are regular participants in international horse race championships.³² A museum in Jordan (the Royal Automobile Museum) is devoted to Royal Family's (King Hussein and King Abdullah II) love for fast cars and motorcycles.³³

Conclusion

To conclude, despite all the discourses about the separation between sport and politics, usually promoted by international sports organisations such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC), sport which is the product par excellence of

²⁹ Lyzaghi Moncef, "King Hassan II's love for Golf," *Annasse Newspaper*, Morocco (14 mars 2014).

³⁰ "Saudi King Abdullah and the royal family partake in the famous traditional Saudi dance known as "Arda" - <http://www.itnsource.com/shotlist/RTV/2009/03/12/RTV429109/#sthash.Vyz7tWSc.dpuf>, (accessed 14 January 2014).

³¹ *Daily Mail* (Online, 3 January 2009): "[Princess Haya of Jordan: A modern Arabian tale](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-1103014/Princess-Haya-Jordan-A-modern-Arabian-tale.html#ixzz2rbDBeMe0)": <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/you/article-1103014/Princess-Haya-Jordan-A-modern-Arabian-tale.html#ixzz2rbDBeMe0>, (accessed 27 January 2014). More photos on her sport achievement are available in the official webpage: <http://english.princesshaya.net/sports>.

³² Photos of Sheikh Mohammed's victory, leading the UAE team, in the 2012 Longines FEI World Endurance Championship at Euston Park in Suffolk, UK <http://www.emirates247.com/sports/other/victory-achieved-by-hard-work-and-persistence-mohammed-2012-08-28-1.472606>. See also photo of Shaikha Futtaim Bint Mohammad Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, who took part in the HH Shaikha Fatima Bint Mubarak Ladies Endurance Cup Ride of 90 Km at Emirates International Endurance Village at Al Wathba: <http://gulfnews.com/sport/other-sports/ali-wins-fatima-ladies-endurance-cup-1.1112993>, (Accessed 27 January 2014).

³³ "[Jordan's King Abdullah races through South Africa on a Harley](http://www.haaretz.com/news/jordan-s-king-abdullah-races-through-south-africa-on-a-harley-1.240000)": <http://www.haaretz.com/news/jordan-s-king-abdullah-races-through-south-africa-on-a-harley-1.240000>, (Accessed 27 January 2014). Photo collections are available in the following link: http://www.royalautomuseum.jo/default.aspx?id=1&fl=1_2_1&lang=en

nation-state system has always been a political domain, including in the Arab World.³⁴ Sport served during the colonial period to promote the national struggle for independence against foreign (French and British) occupations. For instance in Algeria, it is argued that Ben Bella's political conscience was sharpened on high school football pitches under colonial rule:

“when I maneuvered at speed against the enemy,” Ben Bella remembered, “nobody asked me whether I was European or Algerian — I either scored or I didn't, and that was that. I was responsible only to myself for success and failure alike”.³⁵

In post-independence, sport was mobilised to promote the figure of the nation's leader (*Al-Zaim, Al-Kayed*). Sport has been used to legitimise state's ideology and to showcase the nation's (leaders) development projects, particularly during the bidding for, and the staging of, regional and international sports events. Moreover, sport is a tool for integrating the international community. The recognition of Palestine by the IOC and FIFA is celebrated by the Palestinian authority as a step forward toward the recognition of Palestine in the United Nations. Sport is an opportunity for investment and economic development which ought to mobilise and unite the country's political and business elites. Sport is also a space for the population to voice their discontent and disillusionment with the political and economic situations and to shout openly their opposition. This was evident lately, particularly in Egypt where football *ultras* actively participated in toppling Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak,³⁶ and in Bahrain's anti-government protest during Formula One Grand Prix.³⁷

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³⁴ Mahfoud Amara, *Sport, Politics and Society in the Arab World*, Houndmills: Palgrave and MacMillan, 2012.

³⁵ Peter Alegi, (April 12th, 2012) “[Death of a Striker, Fighter, and Socialist](http://www.footballiscominghome.info/tag/ben-bella/)”: <http://www.footballiscominghome.info/tag/ben-bella/>, (Accessed April 13th, 2012).

³⁶ James Dorsey, “[Egyptian football stage set for confrontations of ultras](http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/egyptian-football-stage-set-for-confrontations-of-ultras.aspx?pageID=238&nID=56932&NewsCatID=364)”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, 28 October 2013: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/egyptian-football-stage-set-for-confrontations-of-ultras.aspx?pageID=238&nID=56932&NewsCatID=364>, (Retrieved 30 October 2013).

³⁷ Alexander Dziadosz, “Bahrain stages F1 race amid protests, heavy security,” 21 April, 2013: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/21/us-bahrain-grandprix-idUSBRE93K03D20130421>, (accessed 1 December 2013).

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Abstract

The paper examines how sport has been utilised by Arab rulers, including Presidents, Kings and members of Royal families, for internal politics as well as for place branding and public diplomacy. The paper alludes also to the sport practice and hobbies of Arab leaders aimed at promoting healthy life style, maintaining Arab sport traditions, and for media and public relations.

Keywords: Sport, Arab Leaders, Nation State, Modernity, Tradition, Prestige.

Résumé

L'article témoigne de l'utilisation du sport par les dirigeants arabes, y compris les présidents, les rois et membres des familles royales, dans la conduite de la politique intérieure comme de la diplomatie, ainsi que pour améliorer l'image de marque de leur régime. L'article fait également allusion, dans une moindre mesure, à la pratique sportive et aux loisirs des dirigeants arabes (peu représentés dans le domaine public) visant principalement à promouvoir un style de vie sain, le maintien des traditions sportives arabes, et à des fins de relations publiques.

Mots clés: sport, dirigeants arabes, état-nation, modernité, tradition, prestige.

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