



Body and Ideology

Early Athletics in Palestine (1900 - 1948)

Issam Khalidi

Prior to 1948, there were some 65 athletic clubs in Palestine; approximately 55 of them members of the Arab Palestine Sports Federation (APSF).¹ Jerusalem and its environs alone boasted some 18 clubs (half of these were established in the '40s). These clubs had a tremendous impact on the lives of Palestinian young people (members were mostly, but not exclusively, male), shaping their character and preparing them for social and political involvement.

Further, these athletics teams provided a social, national and institutional base for Palestine's political organization in the first half of the twenty-first century. They developed alongside and in response to Jewish immigration and the Arab-Zionist confrontation. Athletic clubs were important in evoking the Palestinian national consciousness, sustaining connections between villages and cities, and developing ties with groups across the Middle East and parts of Africa. As such, this trend was contested by Zionist forces in Palestine in a struggle played out on the international stage after the re-establishment of the defunct APSF in 1944.

Calisthenics in 1940s Palestine. *Source: Before Their Diaspora*

Jerusalem ranked third after Haifa and Jaffa in the growth of sports clubs. Palestine's first football team was organized in 1908 at Jerusalem's St. George School. (Doctor Izzat Tannous, then a member of the Arab Higher Committee, was one of the players.) In 1909, this team defeated that of the American University in Beirut, then considered one of the best in the region. The result was the inauguration, one year later by a group of young people, of Palestine's first 'national' football team, which competed against missionary teams in Palestine.²

In 1911, a group of Arab and European elites in Jerusalem founded a social athletic club they called Circle Sportive [*al-Muntada al-Riyadi*]. The club was located at the end of the Old City's Ziqaq al-Batma.³ The club made one of its main goals the development of games to strengthen the body and enhance the spirit, which resulted in the staging of a 1,800-meter race through the streets of Jerusalem. Seven of the club's members participated. There was, however, some controversy over which types of games fell under the group's mandate. An article in *Filastin* accused the club of advocating gambling, while another written by a club member eschewed gambling but promoted card-playing in the dreary winter months.⁴

After World War I, the number of Palestinian social clubs, including charitable societies, women's groups and young people's organizations such as the Scouts, grew exponentially. Their appearance as social institutions reflected the growing advancement of nationalist sentiments by elites in light of British Mandate and Zionist expansion. In the '20s, most of these clubs assumed a civic social character, incorporating athletic activities into their programs as sports began to be viewed as an element of social consciousness and nationalist culture. The Dajani Sports Club of Jerusalem and some of the Orthodox clubs that grew out of church affiliation are prime examples here.

Still other teams were established as athletic organizations, and later incorporated social and cultural activities. As 'sport' took its place among cultural and social activities, city and village football teams transformed into athletic clubs, changing their names accordingly. In Palestine at the start of the '30s, Arab social athletic clubs numbered about 20.⁵

The first conference of Orthodox Christian clubs and societies held in July 1923 played an important role in advancing the growth of athletics programs. The conference was held to protest what the Orthodox community perceived as the dominance of foreign churches in local spiritual leadership. It advocated, to balance this control, the establishment of new societies and clubs throughout Palestine and Transjordan. Among these new clubs were Orthodox clubs established in Jaffa (1924), Jerusalem (1926) and Haifa (1937).⁶ Filling out their ranks were the Gaza Sports Club, established in 1924; Jaffa's Islamic Sports Club established in 1926 by the city's young elites; and Haifa's White Star [*al-Nijma al-Baida*], Salisi and Islamic Sports clubs, founded in the '20s.⁷

Established in Jerusalem in 1927, the Arab Sports Club became one of the best teams in the country (in 1946, it merged with the al-Ahli Club to form the al-Ahli al-Arabi Club).⁸ The club set out to encourage health and literacy among young people. It began as a football team and was skilled enough to defeat the country's best, including the Hebron Sports Club, Jerusalem's Arab College team, Jaffa's Islamic Sports Club, and Jewish teams HaPoel Jerusalem and Maccabi HaShmonai Jerusalem. Its membership statutes had a pan-Arab slant, reading: "The club accepts any Arab member regardless of religion, because we are Arabs before we were Muslims and Christians."⁹

In the late '20s, al-Baq'a Club was established in the Jerusalem district of the same name, but its activities were suspended at the start of the next decade. In 1932, al-Rawda Club began operating (its playground remains across from the al-Ma'amunia School in Jerusalem). At the club's opening in August 1933, a speaker evoked nationalist goals: "There are different ways to serve one's nation," he said, "and there are many reasons for doing so, but they all lead to the same result; al-Rawda Club has chosen to serve the nation by improving the circumstances of young people through athletics."¹⁰

Another Jerusalem group, Mamilla Team, was active for a few years in the late '20s and early '30s. Its program was mostly confined to football, although it sought to expand into a club. The Maqdisi Club was established in 1937 in Upper Baqa'a, and included entertainment, athletic, and social activities in its program. The '20s saw the formation of the Muntada al-Dajani, a society based on family affiliation. A decade later, the group had become the Dajani Sports Club, and by the '40s was competing in the Palestine football championships. Also represented in Jerusalem were the Syrian Club [Nadi al-Sirian] and the Armenian Homentmen Club, both renowned for their prowess at boxing.¹¹

Still, these clubs were rarely professionally-trained or specialized. The prominent Jerusalem school, Rawdat al-Maarif (established in 1922), was the exception to this rule, boasting the only physical education teacher in the country. It joined the al-Zahra League (which included first a few Jewish clubs, and then the Arab Sports Club) in 1923. Until 1948, the school competed against the country's best footballers.

Pride and Representation

A major national symbol for Palestine in the '20s was wrestler Abdel-Rahman al-Jizawi, who left the country for Chili when he was 20 years old. Upon his arrival, he met a leader of the Arab community, who took it upon himself to introduce him to Chilean media and coaches. Al-Jizawi demonstrated great feats of strength--he was able to bend metal bars and challenged and defeated an Italian wrestler 20 kilograms above his weight class. His Arab fans went wild that day, carrying him on their shoulders and chanting, "Long live Palestine, Long live the Arabs, Long live al-

Jizawi.” The wrestler was lauded in Chilean newspapers and his name soon became a household word.¹²

But the link between national pride and athleticism among Palestinians did not grow in isolation. The founders of Zionism saw sport’s emphasis on organizational unity and physical fitness as a tool for fulfilling its goal of a new society. Reflecting on the Zionist spirit, Theodor Herzl wrote in his diaries, “I must train the boys to become soldiers.... I shall educate one and all to be free, strong men, ready to serve as volunteers in the case of need.”¹³ Zionism quickly established athletic clubs to build physical fitness—and military preparedness.

Sport had a unique cultural interpretation in the early Zionist movement. It was a tool for national regeneration, and efforts were made to create ‘Jewish sports’ that inspired Zionist feelings. Terms denoting religious-historical (but secular) symbols were superimposed onto the athletic playing field. Teams were named ‘Maccabee’, reminding fans of the years of Jewish independence in the second century BCE; ‘Betar’, signifying the Jews’ last stand against the Romans, and ‘Bar Kokhba’, connoting Jewish rebellion against tyranny. David Ben Gurion said of HaPoel Club, established in 1926 as an affiliate of the Zionist labour organization, that it “is not only an athletic organization but a castle for the working class; it must help the new immigrants.” Indeed, the group became famous for its role in smuggling weapons into the new Jewish settlements.¹⁴

From the ‘20s, Jewish clubs in Europe and the region began to come to Palestine to compete with Jewish clubs there. They flew flags that resembled the Zionist flag, a provocation that local Arabs vigorously protested to the British authorities.¹⁵ Scouts’ parades and athletic events were organized by the Jewish immigrants starting in the twentieth century; one such event was the Rohovot Games, which ran from 1908 to 1914.¹⁶

“Since 1924, the Zionists have been trying to find new tricks for admitting more Jewish immigrants to the country; they have used smuggling and manipulation,” wrote Issa al-Sifri in his 1937 book *Palestine between the Mandate and Zionism*.¹⁷ “They have pretended to submit to the restrictions of the immigration laws [while] transferring Jews to illegal resident status in Palestine by hiding them in the settlements. The Maccabiad was one of the ways of achieving these tasks.” Al-Sifri reports that for the three years following 1933, Palestine saw an average of 60,000 new Jewish immigrants each year. “The Zionist organizations used three ways of smuggling in these illegal immigrants: the Maccabiad, exhibitions and the power of absorption,” he claims. The Maccabiah Games and the Levant Fair were considered perfect opportunities to gain entry to the country, bypassing British immigration restrictions.

The Maccabiad was held in Tel Aviv in 1932 and 1935, hosting thousands of Jews from dozens of countries. The event stirred Jewish nationalism and provided a means

of introducing Jews to the future homeland.¹⁸ It was also a means of normalizing the coming Jewish state in Palestine. Yakutieli, a leader of the Maccabee World Organization wrote in Haaretz on 29 March, 1935, “The recognition of Eretz Israel sports by the international federation can be seen as a direct result of the Maccabiah Games.”

In 1928, the Palestine Football Association (PFA) was established by a coalition of British, Arabs and Jews. Over time, however, Jewish athletes invested great effort, with the help of the British, in dominating this organization. By 1931, the Jews had established the Palestine Sports Federation, an umbrella organization for all kinds of sports. The Zionist movement invested in the PSF, increasing the number of Jewish clubs, and adopting blue and white, the colours of the Zionist movement, as the colours of the federation’s flag. Arabic was subsequently dropped from PSF correspondence. The group sought to invite Arab clubs and teams to compete against its own, proving that Jewish clubs alone were able to represent Palestine. In addition, coordination with clubs in Europe and Arab countries such as Syria, Lebanon and Egypt were used to advance clandestine activities on behalf of the Zionist movement.¹⁹

A March 1931 football match between the Egyptian university team and Jewish teams representing the PSF illustrated these tensions. The Orthodox Club in Jaffa was the only Arab team to play the Egyptian guests and a letter to the editor of Filastin newspaper criticized other Arab clubs for not competing with the Egyptian Tarsana Club. Such matches were crucial in promoting Palestine, the author said.²⁰ A newspaper account described one PFA team as:

a mixture of soldiers of the British Army and Jewish youth... [T]hey were photographed; between them stood the Governor of Jerusalem and the Egyptian Consul... The flags that were raised on the sides of the stadium were the Egyptian flag, between the English and the Zionist flags... Around the stadium were many British soldiers and Palestine police to maintain security.²¹

These attempts to control the PSA motivated local Muslims and Christians to establish the Arab Palestine Sports Federation (APSF) [*al-Ittihad al-Riyadi al-Arabi al-Falastini*]. That the APSF was born after the 1929 Revolt was no coincidence; new tactics were required to handle Zionist expansion and control. In April 1931, invitations were distributed to all clubs in Palestine for a meeting to establish a sports federation. Filastin promoted clubs’ representation at this meeting, and in March, the first national football team was selected to compete against the team of the American University in Beirut. Its members included players from Jaffa’s Islamic Sports Club and Orthodox Club, Jerusalem’s Arab Sports Club, the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA),²² and Saint George’s Club. Two months later, the APSF was born from a coalition of ten clubs at a meeting at the Orthodox Club in Jaffa. Dr. Daoud al-Husseini, of the Islamic Sports Club in Jaffa, was elected president (he later

became secretary when the federation had no president), and George Mousa from the Orthodox Club in Jaffa was elected secretary.

In July 1933, the Arab Sport Club and the Islamic Sport Club in Jaffa joined to play the Egyptian team Alexandria United, only to be defeated four to one. Later that year, the APSF, supported by the Arab Youth Congress [*Mu'tamar al-Shabab al-Arabi*], organized a football tournament between seven local clubs.²³

In 1934 and 1935, as their answer to the Maccabiad, the APSF in cooperation with the Higher Arab Committee and Arab Youth Congress, held an athletic Scouts exhibition (the leaders of the Palestine Arab Party maintained close contact with the Scouts movement, the Youth Congress and the leaders of various sports clubs). This was repeated in March 1936 and May 1937.²⁴ These exhibitions were venues of protest of Zionist immigration, the British Mandate, and celebration of Arab brotherhood. Registering the events, Jewish newspaper HaBoqer mentioned that Arab political parties were organizing strong youth movements in several cities and villages in Palestine for a large exhibition in Jerusalem.²⁵ This was the first attempt to incorporate athletics and scout activities within the agenda of the national movement in Palestine. In March 1937, the Youth Congress held a tournament, and later that June, the tournament of the Armour of King Ghazi [*Dir' al-Malik Ghazi*] was staged between select teams of Jerusalem, Jaffa and Haifa. In 1938, al-Rawda Club won this tournament, defeating the al-Qawmi Club in Jaffa three to one.

Sports were equally a reflection of class and status in Palestine. While football and boxing, for example, were games for the masses, the sport of tennis was largely confined to the English and Palestinians serving in the British administration. The Circle Sportive clubs in Jaffa and Gaza, and the YMCA in Jerusalem were Palestine's main tennis venues. Table tennis was developed in the '30s, however, and found popularity among a diverse array of clubs. In 1938, the Jewish-controlled PSF held a table tennis tournament for the Arab clubs at the al-Qawmi Club in Jaffa. Only three clubs took part.

Jaffa's Orthodox Club was the first in Palestine to offer boxing matches. As early as the 1920s, its members competed against renowned Jewish and British boxers. In August of 1933, the first club dedicated to boxing, the Club of Boxing and Sports, was inaugurated. Its president was the famed boxer Adeeb Kamal, who had fought Egyptian Jewish bruiser Ali Sadiq. In the late 1930s, regionally-known boxer Adeeb al-Dasouqi and his coach Haqqi Mazin established the Olympic Institute in Jaffa, where they taught boxing technique and prepared young people for competition.

Al-Dasouqi himself frequently fought matches in Palestine, often against Jewish boxers. In September 1937, he represented Palestine against Syrian champion Mustafa al-Arnait, and in August 1940, he competed against and tied Yuna, a famous Jewish Maccabiad champion. In 1941, he was invited to Egypt where he defeated Egyptian fighter Abdo Kibrit. Three years later, he shocked everyone by tying Egyptian



The Akka Sports club in 1928. Third from the right in the second row sits Ahmed Shuquairi, who later became chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization. *Source: Before Their Diaspora*

champion Mohammed Faraj in Cairo. In March 1947, al-Dasouqi received a letter from the Arabic Office in Washington expressing sorrow that it was unable to invite him to fight in the US, since—as they wrote—the US organizers were Jewish.²⁶ While there was a subsequent attempt to bring him to Chicago, al-Dasouqi was unable to raise the necessary funds. It was not long after that the Arab Fund [Beit al-Mal al-Arabi] allotted 2,500 pounds for the support of youth events, sport and the Scouts.

Documents suggest that after the 1936 disturbances, the activities of the APSF became paralyzed and its members dispersed. Some Arab clubs joined the PSF dominated by Zionist clubs, in order to continue playing. The al-Rawda Club and the Arab Sports Club in Jerusalem, and *Shabab al-Arab* [The Arab Youth] in Haifa (established in 1934) were among these.²⁷ Many other clubs chose instead to form a local federation and to compete with each other, as some of Haifa's clubs did in 1937.

The result of the break-up of the APSF appears to have meant increased tournaments between Arab and Jewish teams. The domination of the PFA²⁸; the lack of an Arab federation; general political conditions; the absence of coordination between the various Arab athletic clubs; the athletic leaderships' unwillingness to boycott Jewish and English organizations; as well as the perception that sports were not political, were all factors in the changing atmosphere. Also, in many cases, sporting goodwill overruled the increasingly charged political climate.



The football team of the Yaffa secondary School in 1923. *Source: Before Their Diaspora*

Schools & Scouts

The advancement of organized sports in Palestine was closely linked to the development of education. Even though education officials did not emphasize physical education programs in schools, most institutions had competitive football teams. Physical education, on the other hand, was not a priority. Palestine's 85,000 students could not be taught by the single physical education specialist. Most schools had no physical education curriculum, and meted out lessons only once a week. Some schools offered an alumni league; other school districts held annual athletic tournaments in May and June. But most of these events were held under the auspices of the British authorities in Palestine.²⁹

Scouts organizations also had football teams and biked for exercise and entertainment. Some of these scout troops were members in the APSF during both its periods of existence. In August 1945, the leaders of the social-athletic clubs and Arab societies decided to form the Arab Scouts Association [*Jama'ait al-Kashaf al-Arabia*], which included most Arab Scout organizations in the country. It was no coincidence that this umbrella organization was created at the time of the re-establishment of the APSF.

Rebirth of the Arab Palestine Sports Federation

Largely ignoring their Arab counterparts, Jewish clubs sought to present themselves as Palestine's legitimate athletic representatives. In April 1940, 'Palestine' (represented by a selected Jewish team) played the British and French army teams in the Far East. In 1941, the PSA held a track and field exhibition supporting the Red Cross in Tel Aviv that featured athletes from Egypt, the teams of the English Mandate, the teams of Australian forces in Palestine, as well as Jewish athletes.

Palestinians felt great resentment over their exclusion by the Zionist athletic leadership. The idea of organizing an official Arab federation was first broached when in March 1940 a number of clubs formed a committee of 12 clubs governing table tennis competitions. At that time, many Arab clubs withdrew their membership from the PSA. In March 1943, local boxers discussed establishing a Palestine Federation of Boxing, sparking a move towards district federations for each sport. In 1943, the weightlifting federation was established, holding its first competition in May of 1944, in Cinema al-Farouq under the auspices of Jaffa Mayor Omar al-Bitar.³⁰

By 1944, aspirations of bringing Arab clubs under one umbrella were coming together.³¹ The clubs were many and varied. The Palestine Sport Federation in Haifa, for example, included 43 teams from various sports.³² Coincidentally, a football match was planned between the Egyptian army team and the Jewish-dominated PSA. But the Egyptian team refused to visit Palestine unless the Arab clubs also organized a team to play against them. This motivated the Arab clubs to establish their own regional federations so they could also compete against the Egyptian team, like the Jaffa, Jerusalem and Haifa federations. In May, a team was formed to compete with a select British Army team (which defeated the Palestinians one to nothing).

It was these regional federations, along with the Arab Boxing Federation, that decided to reconstitute a national league. At a meeting held at the al-Qawmi Sports Club in Jaffa in September of 1944, the leaders of 35 clubs re-established the APSF. It was officially registered on the 13 September, and letters were sent to each Arab club in Palestine requesting that they apply for membership. The group also sent letters to Arab clubs in neighbouring states, informing them that Palestine had registered an Arab athletic federation. The group distributed its flag with an Arabic monogram to all Arabic clubs, which were divided by region.³³

The APSF's internal regulations stipulated that no member club was to have any relationship with Jewish organizations. Article Six, "Establishing the Federation," states that "the federation consists exclusively of Arab, non-Jewish institutions and clubs in Palestine; each of these clubs has to be involved in a minimum of one sport. All clubs must include no Jewish members (with the exception of the YMCA)." (The YMCA accepted British, Jewish and Arab members, adopting a neutral position to the national conflict.) Club donations were to come from non-Jewish sources, and teams were not allowed to choose Jewish referees.

The APSF authorized its secretary, Abdelrahman al-Habbab, to arrange matches with international teams and clubs. No club was to contact any foreign team without the permission of the central committee. In March 1945, the central committee distributed a periodical asking 45 clubs to agree to these main principles.³⁴ In 1947, membership in the APSF had risen to 60 clubs.

The APSF faced the task of demonstrating that Palestine was home to an organized, quality Arab athletic league that was ready to compete with English and international teams. In December 1944, the APSF started to organize the first football tournament between the regional clubs. The winner was the Islamic Sports Club of Jaffa in 1945, playing against the Jerusalem Orthodox Club. Shabab al-Arab Club of Haifa won the championship the following two years.

Nor was it long before the re-established APSF began to challenge the Zionist league's strategy of presenting itself as the sporting face of Palestine. Between 1934 and 1940, the PSA officially represented Palestine five times in international tournaments.³⁵ In 1945, the secretary of the APSF wrote to the Egyptian Federation, protesting the matches between the Alexandria team and Jewish teams in Palestine. The APSF then sent its secretary to Egypt to negotiate this issue and to coordinate future matches.

This sports diplomacy marked the beginning of a blizzard of matches between local Arab teams and clubs from the surrounding states. The APSF invited the Jordan Athletic Club to play the Gaza Sports Club and Jerusalem's Dajani Sports Club. It also sanctioned a previously-planned football match between Shabab al-Arab Club in Haifa and Nadi al-Sibaq Race Club in Beirut. A few months before the re-establishment of the APSF, in May 1944, the Islamic Club of Haifa had competed in Damascus with the al-Ahli Club of Damascus under the supervision of the Syrian Minister of Education, with the Sports Federation [*al-Ittihad al-Riyadi*] under the supervision of the Syrian Foreign Minister, and with the Damascus Homentmen. The competition between the Islamic Sports Club in Jaffa and a chosen team from the city of Aleppo was attended by 5,000 people (the Islamic Club won four to three). In 1945, the National French Army team played Jerusalem's clubs and in January 1947, a Palestinian national team was chosen to challenge the British Army and Air Force team in Palestine.

While football was a national concentration, another branch of the Federation worked to organize track and field meets, particularly in 1946 and 1947. This committee included famous sports activists Livon Kishishian, George Tannous and Hussein Husni. In July 1947, the group managed to arrange an exhibition in Jaffa at Bassa Field in response to several preceding Jewish events on the grounds. The meet included the 100-meter dash, 200-meter dash, 400-meter dash, 800-meter run, a 1,500 meter run, a relay race, the high jump and long jump, a triple jump, a discus throw, the shot put, and the pole vault. Biking was also under this committee's purview, and on 1 August 1946, a cross-country bike race was organized on al-Qastal Road between Jaffa and Jerusalem. Among the competitors were Egyptian rider al-Houri (so well-

known that the newspaper does not give his first name), Palestinian rider Mustafa Muhammad, and a British representative from the Palestinian Police team.³⁶

Weightlifting became popular in Palestine in the '40s, particularly in Jaffa and Haifa. Ali Talaba was the champion of Palestine. He was also a member of the Egyptian Weightlifting Federation and the International Weightlifting Federation. After the re-establishment of APSF, weightlifting and wrestling were organized through a committee administered by Haqqi Mazin. Here the political overtones were clear: Suleiman al-Beini from the Arab Workers Society was famed for his ability to pin renowned Jewish wrestlers, for example.

Labor unions (such as the *Jamiyat al-Umal al-Arabia* in Haifa) were also active in the APSF. Its members played football and boxed, and did well in wrestling and weightlifting. Government sector employees represented most departments, while private sector workers represented companies such as Shell, Iraqi Petroleum and Barclays Bank.

Growing political competition, however, eventually got in the way of the numerous athletic competitions. APSF coordinated a match between the Syrian and Palestinian national football teams for 12 December, 1947, to be followed by a competition between Lebanon and Palestine. The matches never took place.

In the Court of FIFA

The main conflict over which sports federation had the right to represent Palestine abroad was joined before the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). At the time, the Jewish-controlled PSA had played five international matches representing Palestine, and the Arab-dominated APSF sought to challenge their right to do so. A memorandum sent to FIFA by the APSF gave a brief explanation of the nature of the conflict and increasing Jewish immigration and settlement in Palestine. While expressing appreciation for FIFA's persistence in seeking a solution for the athletic problem in Palestine, the APSF suggested that Palestine be represented by two federations, one Arab and one Jewish. "Simply we could say," the group wrote, "that the members of your federation will not succeed in achieving what the British administration could not do."³⁷

The issue of the APSF's membership application to FIFA was discussed at an international conference in Luxemburg in August 1946. A representative of the PSA spoke, saying that his association was democratic, with a Jewish majority. He argued that if Arab clubs would only become a majority in the association, it would prove the group's "democratic" intent. He also claimed that the number of Arab clubs in Palestine did not exceed four or five, and that this was in fact representative of athletic inferiority. He proposed that the application be rejected.³⁸

The delegation of Lebanon supported permitting the APSF entry, arguing that FIFA's goal was to allow representation of every football league and that the presence of two in one country should not pose a problem. It was clear, however, that FIFA members opposed the entry of another league in Palestine, and the motion was rejected.³⁹

Seeking to ease the sting of rejection, the Syrian Sport Federation subsequently informed the APSF that it would be included under its umbrella, allowing the APSF to compete more freely in international events. Still the APSF was also excluded from membership in FIFA, a fact that reflected the bias in the organization towards the APF, weakness of Arab support for such initiatives, and the Zionist movement's ability to organize to achieve its goals.



Ishaq Mikhail, Ramallah 1939, as photographed by Jad Mikhail. *Source: Arab Image Foundation, Beirut*

Nationalism and Sports after 1944

British Mandate authorities were blunt in their view that indigenous athletic organizations threatened their control. Commenting on the opening of Jerusalem's "first" athletic club in April 1921, the Palestine Weekly held a dim view of General Ronald Storrs' announcement that the club was open to all races and religions. Religious and political clubs in Egypt had been a factor in the disturbances in that country, wrote the paper, and now the authorities had repeated the same mistake in Palestine.⁴⁰ A decade later (in 1935), an official government report on youth movements observed the strengthening of the Scouts and various sports and young people's clubs. The change was happening so fast, warned the paper, that these young people might soon become a factor in challenging the national leadership in Palestine.⁴¹

And indeed, sports club and Scouts members often volunteered for political duties: attending demonstrations against the British, helping to transport dead or wounded, and manning Palestine's beaches to prevent Zionist smuggling and immigration.⁴² During the 1936 general strike, these clubs organized food distribution and protest activities.⁴³ Club members saw themselves as augmenting the role of the authorities where it was failing them.

When the Balfour Declaration was signed, all matches were postponed or cancelled in protest. Similarly, the central committee of the APSF asked clubs to express their sorrow and gather donations for the Syrian Sport Federation and the Syrian public after French colonialists forcefully occupied the Syrian parliament. Another role that the APSF adopted was to congratulate athletes that had been released from prison after being arrested for political activities, and to extend condolences when compatriots were killed.⁴⁴

Palestine's Sports Writer, Hussein Husni

No history of Palestinian athletics would be complete without mention of the unique role of Hussein Husni, who came to Palestine from Egypt and, as previously mentioned, taught physical education at Rawdat al-Ma'aref. He also served at the request of the Higher Islamic Committee as supervisor for the schools of the Islamic orphanage [*Awqaf Dar al-Aitam al-Islamiya*].

After the re-establishment of the APSF, Husni became a member of its track-and-field committee, and editor of sports news in *Filastin* newspaper. Husni's articles reflected an awareness of the essential role of sports and physical education that was rare at the time. He tried to generate interest in physical activity by pouring his knowledge of the benefits of physical exercise into his articles. He also advocated physical exercise for women, and criticized the authorities for their neglect of the body. In one typical article, Husni described the sorry state of Jerusalem's athletic facilities, where the city had only six playing fields, four for foreigners and two for the Arabs. One of the Arab fields, that of the YMCA, had been occupied by the army for seven months, he complained. The second belonged to Terra Santa and was the site of all matches. "We all ask: 'Where is the government?' Others ask: 'Where is the municipality?' I say frankly: 'They are not ready to offer assistance for the benefit of the body.'⁴⁵ His and other sports articles were published daily after the revival of the APSF, demonstrating the connection between institutional unity and a strong written message.

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Endnotes

¹ This article is an excerpt from the author's unpublished book, *A History of Sport in Palestine before the Naqba* [*Tarikh al-Haraka al-Riyadia fi Falastin qabl al-Naqba*].

² Khalidi, Walid. *Before their Diaspora: A Photographic History of the Palestinians 1876-1948* (Beirut: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1984) 231.

³ In February of 1913, lawyer Francis Khayyat was elected president of the club; Anton Jallad and

Alfonse Roq became vice presidents and Alfonso Alonso and Fuad Kassab were selected as treasurer and secretary, respectively.

⁴ *Filastin*, 23 February 1913.

⁵ Khalidi, Issam. "Al-Haraka al-Riyadia al-Falastinia Duroos wa Ibar", *al-Majella al-Thaqafia Quarterly* Number 53 (Amman: Jordan University).

⁶ Al-Sifri, Issa. *Palestine between the Mandate and Zionism*, [*Filastin bein al-Intidab wa al-*

Sahyoonia] (Jaffa: 1937) 184-187.

⁷ The Islamic Sports Club in Jaffa had one of the best football teams in the country, and was champion in 1945. It included Abd al-Rahman al-Habbab (later secretary of the APSF) among the football team's 'first generation'. Dr. Daoud al-Husseini, who worked hard to establish the APSF in the early '30s, was one of the club's founding members.

⁸ Filastin, 12 June, 1928. Its board consisted of Fouad Khader, Nizar Istanbuli, Fawzi al-Nashashibi (treasurer), Khalid al-Duzdar (athletic committee), and Ibrahim Nuseibeh (secretary).

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ Filastin, 15 August 1933.

¹¹ Representing the Jerusalem villages were: the al-Qawmi Youth Club, Silwan Sports Club, al-Husseini Club in Malha, Anahda Club in Deir Yassin, the Cultural Club in Lifta, the Qarawi Club in Beit Safafa, the Arab Karimi Club in Ein Karim, the al-Qawmi Youth Club in Qalunia. Most of these clubs were established in the 1940s.

¹² Filastin, 9 November, 1928.

¹³ Herzl, Theodor. *The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl Vol 1* (New York: Herzl Press and Thomas Yoseloff, 1960) 51.

¹⁴ The first Maccabee club was founded in Jerusalem in 1911. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* writes: "The Hapoel members pioneered in naval and other activities in order to assist illegal immigration into Palestine. They also helped to establish settlements and were active in the Haganah. The Betar clubs were established in 1924." Al-Sifri also indicated that Zionist clubs motivated youth to achieve Zionist goals in Palestine by involving them in the paramilitary movement. They believed in strength, and that in a sinful world only the strong were likely to get what was due them. The members of these athletic clubs were specifically those young people organized by revisionists such as Zeev Jabotinsky to learn military techniques under the cover of athletic games.

¹⁵ The executive committee of the Muslim and Christian Association sent the High Commissioner for Palestine a protest against the flying of the Zionist flag at a football match held in Jerusalem on 12 January, 1925, asking whether the ordinance regulating the flying of flags, issued by the Government of Palestine in August 1920, had been abrogated. The ordinance in question reads as follows: "The flag or emblem of any state may not be carried or exhibited for the purpose of any

partisan demonstrations." The governor of the Jerusalem-Jaffa District replied: I have the honour of informing you that the flag was the club flag of the Hakoah football team (from Vienna)... It is apparent that the Hakoah Club flag is not a state flag, and equally apparent that it was not being carried or exhibited for the purpose of any partisan demonstration, and that the ordinance was therefore in no way infringed. In the Palestine Bulletin, 24 March 1925.

¹⁶ Filastin, 20 April, 1913, in an article entitled "al-Isti'rad al-Sahioni al-Kabir" ["The Great Zionist Show"].

¹⁷ (Jaffa) 215-16.

¹⁸ See Issam Khalidi, "Al-Maccabiad,... al-Sahyooniya wa Istiqlal al-Riyada," *al-Arabi Monthly* no 548 (Kuwait).

¹⁹ Elmessiri, Abdelwahab. *The Land of Promise* (New Jersey: North Brunswick, 1977) 39. "In the 1920s," he writes, "the Jewish Agency set up an espionage network that had branches in the Arab world operating clandestinely behind legitimate front organizations, such as the Maccabee clubs or the numerous Jewish organizations. The Mossad established a centre in 1937 to train Arab Jews in espionage activities against their own countrymen. The spies were called 'the Arab boys'."

²⁰ *Filastin*, 25 February, 1931.

²¹ *Filastin*, 28 March, 1931.

²² The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Jerusalem was established in 1921. In 1932, a large, million-dollar building was built and donated to the movement by a wealthy American. Among the association's members were English, Arabs, and Jews. Its founders claimed that the association's purpose was purely cultural, social, and athletic, and that its objective was the academic and moral education of youth. It was non-denominational, and adhered to a principle of non-interference in political and religious matters. The association generated considerable interest in athletics, particularly soccer, basketball, and table tennis. The YMCA organized dozens of championships for basketball and table tennis, with participation from several Arab athletic clubs. So many of the association's members and employees were Arabs that the organization took on an Arab flavour for a quarter century. In 1932 and 1935, when Israel tried to convince the association to participate in its Maccabiah Athletic Games, held in Tel Aviv, the YMCA complied with Arab Palestinian requests that it not share in the games (*Filastin* 30 March 1932). The reason given

was that the events were used for propaganda. The Palestine Bulletin accused YMCA authorities of yielding to the pressure of “extremists.”

²³ *Filastin*, 7 May, 1933.

²⁴ The Higher Committee of these games included Ibrahim Darwish, Hussein Husni, Daoud al-Husseini, Khalid al-Duzdar (secretary), Baha Eddin Taba’a, and Haqqi Mazin. About 5,000 Scouts and athletes took part. They competed in track and field events and raced on Arabic horses.

²⁵ *Filastin*, 4 June, 1937.

²⁶ *Filastin*, 25 March, 1946.

²⁷ The Arab Sports Club of Jerusalem announced its decision to remain a member in its annual report for 1937-1938. Shabab al-Arab was the only Arab club to participate in the PSA’s first league.

²⁸ “Since the outbreak of these events [the 1936 revolt], an incentive effort was made in the Jewish Yishuv to hold sporting contests in football, swimming, water polo and hockey against the army units, in an attempt to bring British soldiers closer to the Zionist settlement in Palestine.” From Harrif H. and Galily Y., “Sport and Politics in Palestine, 1918-48: Football as a Mirror Reflecting the Relations between Jews and Britons”. *Journal of Soccer and Society* 2003, vol 4 pt 1, 41-56.

²⁹ *Filastin*, 23 May, 1945.

³⁰ The athletes included Ali Hataria from the Islamic Sports Club in Jaffa, Issa al-Tams from the Orthodox Scouts Society in Jaffa, Darwish Katba of al-Qawmi Sports Club in Jaffa (who was also Palestine’s heavyweight champion, training at the Olympic Institute in Jaffa.

³¹ “In Palestine, there is a federation called the Palestine Soccer Association,” reported a 25 February 1943 article in *Filastin*. “It includes the majority of Jewish clubs and some of the Arab clubs.”

³² Its members included the Islamic Sports Club, Shabab al-Arab, The Society of Armenian Youth, Homentmen, Carmel, Salisi, Syriani, Catholic, Ahli, Tarsana, Society of Catholic Youth, and Youth Maronite Scouts.

³³ The Federation was represented by a Central Committee that supervised the athletic-organizational process. It consisted of Ibrahim Nuseibeh and Roq Farraj for the Jerusalem region, Yunis Nafa’a and Fahd Abdelfattah for the Haifa region, Abdelrahman al-Habab and Spiro Iqdis for the Jaffa region, Rashad al-Shawwa for the Gaza Region, Jamal Yusif Qasim for the Nablus region, and Muhammad al-Zu’ubi for the Galilee region.

³⁴ A disciplinary committee was established (Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi, Raja al-Husseini, and Atallah Qiddis) to pursue violations by clubs and players. In 1947, this committee’s members were Izzat Tannous, Amin Aqil, Robert Kalfiktini, Ahmad al-Khalil, Anwar Nusseibeh).

³⁵ The PSA sent teams to qualify for the 1934 World Cup playing in Cairo against Egypt (losing 1 to 7) and in Tel Aviv against Cairo (losing 1 to 4). In the 1938 qualifiers, it played Greece in Tel Aviv (losing 1 to 3) and then again in Athens (losing 0 to 1). In a ‘friendly’ match on April 1940 in Tel Aviv against Lebanon (where five members of the Lebanese team refused to take part in solidarity with their Arab comrades in Palestine), the PSA team won 5 to 1.

³⁶ *Filastin*, 3 August, 1946.

³⁷ APSF memo to FIFA, Jaffa, 1946.

³⁸ The number of Arabic clubs in operation in Palestine at this time exceeded 60. On one hand, Zionism used sport to achieve political goals; on the other hand, it also tried to sever any perceived links between sport and politics.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Filastin*, 12 April, 1921.

⁴¹ Al-Sifri. Book I, 195.

⁴² Al-Sifri. Book II, 34.

⁴³ Lesch, Ann Mosely. *Arab Politics in Palestine, 1917-1939: The Frustration of a National Movement* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1979).

⁴⁴ *Filastin*, 10 January, 1948.

⁴⁵ 23 August, 1946. The football fields in Jerusalem were those affiliated with the YMCA, St. George’s, al-Rawda, Terra Santa School, Hashmonai, Zion School, al-Umma School, al-Katamon.