

Can Sports Help the Lebanese Get Unified?

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In the wake of the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war, the official discourse of the state-building project was characterized by key «fundamental provisions», which demonstrate the aspirations of moving from «mini-states» to a «state». Among the provisions regarded as the springboard for the state reconstruction process figure the «consolidation of the National Unity». Almost, two decades later, state institutions and national elite failed to nourish a sense of societal belonging to a nation. The Lebanese are said to revert to their primordial identities to the extent that the religious communities act as the intermediaries between the state and the society. But this is only part of the story. There are some arenas – like sports that can act a vital medium to express and reformulate identities and meanings – where the Lebanese tend to imagine a defiant nation amidst the so-called breakdown or disintegration of the state and flailing national identification and belonging. This is the case when Lebanese almost got qualified to the Brazil 2014 World Cup.

Football, Nationalism and Sectarianism

Sports cannot be looked at simply as an isolated domain of fun, entertainment and distraction. They also can serve to explore questions of nationalism and nation-state building and are directly implicated in nation-building projects.

The growing literature on sports in Lebanon sheds light on how almost all the clubs have a certain sectarian identity, or to say the least, are identified according to their sectarian affiliation. From this perspective, football in post-war Lebanon has been a tool to renew and duplicate the dynamics of the sectarian political system in Lebanon. Therefore, the politics of sport did contribute directly to national disintegration and lack of national unity. But sports should not strictly look at how the politics from above, or how clubs are managed, and federations are run. They should also tackle how normal citizens respond to national victories and how they contribute from below to imagine a united and defiant Lebanon.

Lebanon: A Strong and Defiant Nation

With the kick-off of the qualifying rounds to the 2014 World Cup, the Lebanese team was for many a hopeless case. This was partially due to the absence of sufficient infrastructure and a powerful and functional league as well as the lack of popular support from the audience due to the prohibition of people attending games for fear of sectarian clashes and as a result of a highly politicized Football Association. However, the Lebanese national team improved its performance day after day, scoring victories against the strongest teams in Asia including South Korea, Iran and Kuwait. As the team began to win, it acquired attention from public opinion, turning it away from the backdrop of what was happening in the country including political deadlock and clashes on the street. The victory of the national team against South Korea, for instance, was described as the only event that effectively united the people in a divided Lebanon, irrespective of their sectarian background. As the victories unfolded, a defiant Lebanon began to be imagined.

In the final and decisive round of the FIFA World Cup qualification, Lebanon was competing in Group A, which included Uzbekistan, South Korea, and most significantly Qatar and Iran. The latter two



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countries are known for having direct interests in the Lebanese political scene. Competing against both teams the normal Lebanese citizens felt liberated from this influence.

These games became an expression of an 'imagined nation,' which can be strong, defend its rights, and compete with other powerful countries instead of yielding to their rules. During the match against Qatar, one Lebanese fan held a big 'banana' balloon [*mawza* in Arabic] in order to ridicule the Qatari Emir's wife, Sheika

Moza. In other words, football provided a sense of connectedness through which the Lebanese people asserted themselves on a regional level. National fervor and patriotism similarly were conspicuous during Lebanon's match against Iran. Another case in point is the night following Lebanon's victory against Iran in Beirut, a sports TV anchorman recited a poem to praise Lebanon.

The poem reads:
We return full of will... relentless

Like a phoenix we return from under the rubble, from under the debris... the cedar heroes have Returned on the day of victory, on the day of glory.

Indeed, the country that uses candles the most Won over Iran whose power is utmost, Over its nuclear reactor The country whose sons long to the light of a lamp To the detriment of Iran has become a champ And in two years you might see it in the Samba land

The poem made Lebanon appear proud ('we return full of will, relentless') despite its limited resources ('under the rubble, from under the debris'), which affected the daily lives of the Lebanese people ('uses the candles the most'). Most importantly, the defiant character of Lebanon emerged facing the powerful Iran ('whose power is utmost'), which played a major role in Lebanon's politics specifically with its unconditional support of Hezbollah. While the poem concluded hoping to see Lebanon playing in the Samba land, meaning Brazil, where the 2014 World Cup was hosted, this line also echoed a myth related to the figure of the savvy Lebanese merchant found in different corners of the world. The myth promised that, once qualified, Lebanon would be 'playing' on its own ground that is the Brazilian ground, as the poem also said. In fact, Lebanon's largest and oldest immigrant community is found in Brazil. Therefore, the support for the national team came from both the Lebanese people who lived in Lebanon and the diaspora.

This experience, indeed, does not suggest that sectarianism is not important in Lebanon. Instead, it is an important lesson for researchers, pundits and journalists to shed light on different areas where the Lebanese people have the chance to render the sectarian variable almost dull, meaningless and anachronistic.

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