

The Lebanese Shia and Sports

Football as a Model



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Researcher: **Ali Marwani**

Editor: **Sawssan Abou-Zahr**

Research Coordinator: **Mahmoud Hemadi**

Documentation: **Abbas Hadla**

General Supervision: **Monika Borgmann, Ali Mansour**

A Cross Section of a History The Shia Community in Lebanon

تواریخُ مُتْقَاطِعَة حِصَّة الشیعة منها فی لبنان

UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R) is undertaking a history project in Lebanon entitled A Cross Section of a History. This project will create a space to explore and deepen understanding of the socio-political histories of specific communities within Lebanon - including the Shia, among others - to trace and explore their historical dynamics until today. Micro-level histories of individuals, families, and towns in Lebanon will be addressed, out of the belief that examination of these various histories will show the mosaic of personal and collective experiences of communities in Lebanon over history.

The title of the project "a cross section of a history" embodies this mission: by focusing on specific elements of Lebanon's collective, cacophonous history, we aim to illuminate unique and collective dynamics, identities, and transformations that help to explain the Lebanon we are seeing today. This project aims to directly engage with community members around Lebanon and in the diaspora, as well as academics and experts. The outputs of the project will be a research report and collections of archival material.



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Tel: +961 1 553604
P.O. Box: 25-5 Ghobeiry, Beirut - Lebanon
www.umam-dr.org | www.memoryatwork.org



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Introduction

Memory comprises a significant space in our lives that cannot be underestimated: it preserves our history and its milestones, narrates its events, and outlines its transformations, leading us to our present state. It serves as the foundation upon which the present relies to move forward into the future, understanding what the days conceal or declare. As such, this research has identified the relationship between sports and the Lebanese Shia community as a key area for analysis as part of a project that seeks to explore elements of Lebanese history. This has included understanding how changes to the field of sports in Lebanon occurred and where they intersected with overall transformative paths in Lebanon. This journey starts from the marginalization and absence of the Shia from the sports world, and traces the relationship to the current culmination of the community's dominance over most of its facets, especially in the popular sport of football. It explores the beginnings of football in Lebanon and its transformation from having Christian-dominated unions and clubs to the Shia community's control over all facets of the game, including clubs, unions, players, championships, and fans.

This research consists of an introduction and four

sections. The introduction establishes how sports extend beyond a mere physical activity to an area that conveys political and religious messages and reveals group affiliations with nationalities, regions, religions, and sects. The first section presents the history of sports in Lebanon, with a focus on Shiite involvement in its various fields and the circumstances surrounding it. The second section narrates the history of football from its inception, the establishment of the union, the entry of Shia teams into it, their affiliation, and their subsequent control over the sport. The third section analyzes Shiite clubs in Lebanon, providing a brief overview of the most important teams across Lebanon and a detailed account of al-Ahed sports club, particularly as it claims to represent Shiite interests with political implications. The fourth section is dedicated to the fans and followers of this sport, especially those supporting al-Najma and al-Ahed clubs, given the former has the largest fan base in Lebanon and the latter's Shiite-dominated share of support and its expression of itself through purely sectarian orientations and slogans.

This research relies on a historical methodology to narrate the trajectory of the beginnings of sports and football in Lebanon. It also employs an analytical approach concerning the relationship between the audience and other clubs in Lebanon, particularly the fans of Al-Najma, as well as explaining the relationship of Al-Ahed with its supporters and the utilization of this connection to mobilize Shiite youth and disseminate ideology.

This research encountered difficulties primarily related to the scarcity of sources and references addressing the topic of sports in Lebanon from the perspective of it being an activity that extends beyond the playing field and the challenges of sports themselves in the realm of social analysis. While there is an abundance of

information regarding football in Lebanon, it is largely in the form of club news and activities, or personal accounts and anecdotes. Therefore, this research undertakes a usually neglected view of sports in general, and football in particular, in seeing the topic as serving as a mirror reflecting the reality of a specific country. Specifically, this research contributes research and analysis that finds that those who hold sway over sports in a country can exert significant social power over the field and the affiliated communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has addressed the reality of the Shia community in Lebanon through the lens of sports, particularly football. It traced the evolution of this popular sport from its inception to the present day, reflecting the distinctive features of the broader Lebanese context, marked by sectarian, political, and regional dimensions that assert themselves across all arenas.

Since the establishment of Greater Lebanon in 1920, sports in the country have been organized into federations and clubs; this has included the sport of football, whose union was the first official federation. The beginnings of sports in Lebanon witnessed the nearly-complete absence of members of the Shia community at the official level. While the football union in Lebanon was founded in 1933, it was only in 1946 that Tadamon Sour, the first Shia club, officially joined. It was only in 1966 that the first officially recognised club was established in the southern suburbs of Beirut: the Shabab al-Sahel club.

In Lebanon, sports in general were initially practiced within elite universities and schools, and it is worth noting that at the time of the establishment of Greater Lebanon, members of the Shia community were not present in large educational institutions, while Christian

and Sunni communities were. However, over time, the sports scene in the country changed dramatically, with football especially becoming a popular game in alleys, streets, and eventually in clubs. While football started in cities, its presence outside urban areas became important because its practice requires space that is not easily available in other cities. The small popular clubs that used to feed larger clubs with players disappeared and were replaced by football schools. Therefore, prominent clubs in recent years have established academies in various Lebanese regions to scout for talent, especially in areas with a significant Shia presence. Members of the Shia community have been dominating Lebanese football in recent decades, encompassing unions, clubs, players, and fans. The football union is led by a Shia, Shiite clubs hold the majority share, and Shiite players are the most prevalent on the field.

The first chapter of this research provided a general overview of the entry of organized sports into Lebanon, highlighting the official involvement of the Shia community in various disciplines, with a particular focus on football. The second chapter delved into the history of the Lebanese Football Association, charting its founding, historical phases, and the absence of Shia participation in significant roles, culminating in their eventual control over the administration, coinciding with the Shia presence expanding within its clubs and fan base. The third chapter explored Shia clubs across different regions and documented their transition from local popular clubs to official entities represented in the association. It underscored the significance of these clubs in various areas: leadership in the south, stability in Mount Lebanon, vulnerability in the Bekaa, and achievement in Beirut, where Al-Ahed secured Lebanon's only Asian title out of all its clubs .

The fourth and final chapter shed light on the Shia fan base, delving into its sectarian, political, and regional

backgrounds and examining their impact on sports allegiance. This chapter highlighted the unwavering commitment of these fans to express their affiliations on the stands through slogans reflective of their diverse backgrounds. It discussed two contrasting fan bases, one representing al-Ahed's supporters aligned with Hezbollah, characterized by strong sectarian and party affiliations, and the other exemplified by the fan base of al-Najma, the largest in Lebanon, who transcend sectarian, regional, and party boundaries associated with the club's sponsors.

