

Sorek, T. **Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave** Cambridge University Press 2007 240 pp. £48.00 (hardback)

Reviewing this book was a challenging task for the following reasons: (1) intellectually, because Sorek adopts diverse disciplinary and methodological interpretations of his subject matter; (2) politically, because as an Arab academic, although born in the post-independence (and post-Nasser) era, my perspective is shaped by politico-religious discourses around the Palestinian question more generally, and the 'nakba' (catastrophe) in particular; and (3) morally, because as an Algerian I feel a strong sense of identification with the Palestinians as a colonized people. Sorek too is torn between, on the one hand, his empathy with the Palestinian minority in Israel, and on the other his belief that Israel is a unique democracy in the region, and is thus the 'only' place in the region where Palestinians might enjoy their 'civil rights' (p. 3). Having disclosed all that, however, my role as reviewer imposes on me certain intellectual responsibilities with regard to providing a constructive and properly evaluative critique.

The book puts forward the argument that in the post-Ottoman period and later on under the British mandate, modern forms of sport were adopted by the emergent Palestinian nationalist movement both as a tool for nation-building *and* as an expression of anti-colonial and anti-Zionist sentiment. Moving between religious and secular expressions of their aspirations for a Palestinian nation, Palestinian elites found in modern sport – particularly in its medical (naturalist) discourse with an emphasis on hygiene and discipline of the body – the discourses and means for strengthening the Palestinian youth who were the hope (the soldiers) of the potential future nation. Between 1944 and 1946, the Arab Palestinian Sport Association attempted to secure a recognition by FIFA, but it was unsuccessful. It was only in 1998 that the Palestinian Football Federation was officially affiliated to FIFA.

The book documents the ways in which Palestinian aspirations for nationhood were arrested in the post-1948 period. However, it also shows how 'the promotion of the athletic realm was considered a useful tool for constructing a partial citizenship, as well as disciplining and surveying a minority with potential separatist aspirations and identification with the enemy' (p. 32). To better serve this purpose, a network between the military government, *the Histadrut* (the Israeli trade union congress) through its Arab department, and *Ha-Po'el* (the *Histadrut* sports organization), strongly linked to the ruling party *Mapai*, was formed. This network was employed by the new colonial administration to establish 'its rule over a population whose loyalty was seen as fragile and situational' (p. 34). This did not, however, as Sorek documents, prevent nationalist activists from forming their own independent Arab soccer leagues. Following the (official) end of the military government, integration within

state supervised sport, and later on, the commercial sport structure, was the only possible option for Palestinians.

The participation of an Arab soccer player in the Israeli team in the 1976 Montréal Olympic Games constituted a significant turning point for the Palestinians, and this was galvanised later by the success of Palestinian soccer teams in 2003 when *Sakhnin* and *Al-Nasira* were promoted to the Premier League. Further, in 2004 *Sakhnin* won the Israeli State Cup, its ticket to a historic participation in the UEFA cup. Sorek interprets these successes as a sign of Palestinian integration to (urban-capitalist) Israeli society and to its particular mode of consumption. From a political point of view local Palestinian municipalities, which were heavily supportive of the local soccer clubs (playing mainly in lower divisions), were one of the few available spaces for Palestinian populations to exercise their civil rights. They thus constituted a minor, and perhaps illusory, political gain.

Sorek writes about the way in which Palestinian media reporting on soccer constituted yet another site of Palestinian nationalism, and that it attempted to (re)claim, at least in metaphorical sense, the link between the soccer field, national identity and territory. In addition, sports writers also viewed soccer as an arena in which expressions for integration (but not assimilation) into Israeli society were manifest where, for example, the selection of a Palestinian player for the Israeli national team was celebrated as a sign of Israeli recognition of minority talent. Conversely, for the Hebrew press, such moments provided the opportunity to promote Israel as a 'tolerant and egalitarian society' (p. 97). In another interesting example, Sorek argues that soccer can be understood as an 'integrative enclave' by highlighting the numbers of Palestinian fans of Jewish teams. He argues that these examples demonstrate soccer as 'a safe arena of blessed "apolitical" identity' (p. 108).

An interesting angle that Sorek does not explore is the issue of whether there were any attempts by Arab Jews (from Yemen, Iraq and North Africa) to use sport as a site to claim their full belonging to Israeli citizenship, and simultaneously to express their (suppressed) Arab identity. If so, the concept of 'integrative enclave' would have a different implication and make problematic the conventional opposition between *Jewishness* (an ethno-religious identity) and *Arabness* (an ethno-linguistic identity), which is misleading and only adds to the 'semantic disorder' (Arkoun, *Intellectual Traditions in Islam*, 2001) that characterizes discussions about identity in Israel. Moreover, despite the dramatic turn that the political conflict between Palestinian nationalist factions has very recently taken in the besieged Palestinian territory, and the physical divide between Palestinian communities that the so-called 'security fence' imposes, any investigation of Palestinians as a divided community simply must include a discussion of the wider Palestinian diaspora. The composition of the Palestinian national team illustrates why this is the case: it is comprised of diaspora third generation Palestinian players from Europe and Latin America along with those from Gaza and the West Bank. Yet another important omission from the book was any discussion of the relationship between sport and racial identities.

These small criticisms aside, Sorek demonstrates considerable skill in capturing the complexity of the topic and drawing together the intricate social and political context and the uniqueness of sport, and in particular soccer, as a field of study. It does well to point out a host of fascinating implications around the questions of sport and the politics of identity, sport and nation-building, sport and the question of (ethno-religious) minorities, and sport in the colonial context. As such, the book makes an important contribution to knowledge within sociological studies of the Middle East in general and to sport studies in particular.

Mahfoud Amara
Loughborough University