

# **Palestine Sports and Scouts: Factional Politics and the Maccabiad in the 1930s**

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The period 1932-1936 witnessed remarkable cooperation between youth, scouting and sports movements in Mandate Palestine. The youth component was the common denominator among these three activities. Issa al-Sifri points out that a historian of the national movement needs to address the Palestinian youth movement, because it was the first organized youth movement in an Arab country.<sup>1</sup>

The issue of sports and scouting had been discussed at the first and second conferences of the Youth Congress, in Jaffa on 4 December 1932, and in Haifa on 10 May 1935.<sup>2</sup> In order to achieve national goals, for the first time, the Palestinian athletic and scouting movements, in coordination with the Youth Congress, decided to use a joint field day for athletes and boy scouts as a component of its national-ideological program.<sup>3</sup> This initiative came about not only because sports had become a part of social consciousness and a means for bringing up a strong new generation at that time. Rather it was a response and a reaction to the Maccabiah Games which were held in Tel Aviv in 1932 and 1935, hosting thousands of Jewish youth from dozens of countries.<sup>4</sup>

Lack of interest in researching sports history, and the scarcity of secondary sources dealing with this sphere of culture, cast this exhibition into oblivion, leaving a blank page in the history of Palestinian athletic cultural life. It is this omission that the present paper attempts to begin to remedy.

## **The Exhibition of July 1935**

The Arab Palestine Sports Federation (APSF) or Palestine Sports Association (PSA), which was established in April 1931, in coordination with the scout leadership and the Youth Congress, decided to hold an athletic skills exhibition on al-Bassa esplanade in Jaffa in

July 1935. The APSF formed a special committee to organize the field day: Dr. Daud al-Husayni, secretary of the PSF, Haqqi Mazin, Ibrahim Murad, Mustafa al-Taher, Mamdouh Nabils and Husayn Husni.<sup>5</sup> The committee faced several challenges, mainly the low level of participation by the majority of the sports clubs and scout troops. Another challenge was the negative attitude the British Mandate had toward this exhibition, at the same time that it was supporting and facilitating Jewish athletic activities.<sup>6</sup>

In order to get a permit from the authorities who feared this kind of youth activity, on 29 June 1935 the *qaimaqam* [governor of a provincial district] of Jaffa sent the secretary of the APSF a letter demanding that the latter submit an application describing the field day and detailing its schedule and everything related to it. The secretary of the APSF responded on 30 June, informing him that the federation decided to hold this exhibition with the participation of all its member clubs and the scout troops. Wearing their scout and athletic uniforms, these groups would leave the headquarters of the Youth Congress, cross the Shuhada' [martyrs] Square, Iskandar Awad Street and Besters Street, and finish near the courthouse.<sup>7</sup>

The organizing committee had a great desire to set up this exhibition on al-Bassa field (today's Bloomfield) in Jaffa. It decided to build a temporary wall around it. But unfortunately, the municipality and the government opposed this idea. Some of the teams were all but prohibited from practicing in preparation. The committee was forced to rent the field from its Arab owner, Abu Ghoss, because it had been rented to ha-Poel, a Jewish sports organization established in 1926 and affiliated with Histadrut, the Jewish trade union organization. Some of this organization's members tried to prevent Abu Ghoss from renting the field. However, he stood up to this threat, and did not submit to their wishes. He threatened to compel them to leave the field, so ha-Poel submitted to his request.<sup>8</sup>

In the early morning of 14 July 1935 the teams started to arrive in Jaffa. At 2:30 pm they moved to the playing field where their arrival at 3 pm coincided with the opening of the exhibition. All the athletic teams were in white colors; every club carried its own flag, while flags for each club were raised around the field. Issa al-Sifri mentions that five thousand youths participated in this exhibition; they competed in running, jumping and other track and field events.<sup>9</sup> The games included general club games such as the 100, 200, 400, 800, and 1,500 meters running races; long and high jumps, and javelin, shot put, and discus throws. It also included the ten-kilometer bicycle race, relay races, wrestling and fencing matches, and weight lifting competitions. A few boxing rounds were held during breaks. Some clubs introduced their own games.<sup>10</sup> The parade of the horsemen of *Firqat al Khayyalah* led by Shaykh Shaker Abu al-Kishk had a tremendous emotional effect on the attendees.<sup>11</sup> Many boy scout troops (with their own flags and bands) and Palestinian school sports teams, including Rawdat al-Ma'arif from Jerusalem, took part in this exhibition.<sup>12</sup>

*Al-Najah* school team in Nablus apologized for not attending the exhibition due to the summer vacation. Unfortunately some other teams and clubs did not participate in the games, including the Orthodox clubs in Jaffa and other cities. Probably the reason was the lack of coordination between APSF and the Youth Congress on one side and the clubs' administrations on the other. Another reason could be that many clubs thought that this

exhibition would have political objectives; they did not want to enter into confrontation with the British authorities. It was apparent that the level of nationalist identification varied among the different clubs. Nevertheless in the end the exhibition received a substantial amount of acclaim from the public. Some Jewish newspapers expressed their fear of this kind of exhibition, describing its goals as “organizing a strong youth movement in different Palestinian villages and cities.”<sup>13</sup>

## **British Opposition and Palestinian Factionalism**

*Filastin* newspaper referred to the major obstacles that confronted the organizers:

The Youth Congress was deluded when it thought a few months ago of holding a scouts athletic exhibition. The Mandate government opposed this project and fiercely resisted it. ... It prohibited the participants from walking in large groups, allowing only small teams to arrive one after the other from different directions. When the exhibition ended the participants were prohibited from leaving in groups, forced instead to leave individually. This is how the Mandate government treats Arab scouts. The reader must compare intransigence with the Arabs with the toleration of the Jewish Maccabi, those people who come from different parts of the world to settle in “the Land of Israel,” and gather as trained soldiers, eager to build their national home on the ruins of the Arabs and at the expense of the life and future of their citizens.<sup>14</sup>

Concerning the manner in which the exhibition challenged British authorities, the day after the games *al-Difa* ‘ newspaper suggested how “masculinity,” defense, and sportsmanship were related:

What we intend to do is to develop sportsmanship and military training in the young generation. This spirit raises us from the low level (at which we live) to a world of ethical orientation (nobility of character). They deprived us of military training yet permitted it to themselves. They closed the doors to physical strength and wellbeing ....<sup>15</sup>

Ten years later, in June 1945, Husayn Husni the coeditor of the sports column in *Filastin*, wrote describing this exhibition “It was great, the good memory of it still alive. I wonder if history will repeat itself.”<sup>16</sup> The attendance of women at this exhibition had attracted the attention of many; their number was not substantial, but their encouragement was no less than the men’s. Among the attendees was Hajj Amin al-Husayni, the head of the Higher Arab Committee, Jamal al-Ghazi, Raghib Abul Saud, Shaykh Shaker Abu al-Kish, Tawfiq al-Dajani, a member of the Haifa Central Court, Musa Nimr, Jawdat Bibi, head of the Arab Bank, Nazmi Inibtawi, Jamil al-Khalidi, Ali Dabbagh and Dr. Nusuh Nabils.

Also attending were the members of the Municipality of Jaffa, the Youth Congress and other dignitaries.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the obstacles which confronted the exhibition, a new problem appeared. The festival's organizing committee sent invitations to selected elite political and social figures and excluded others. Under the title "The Sports Federation and Factionalism" Khalil Mazin wrote the following in *Filastin*:

The people heard that the Sports Federation sent an invitation to attend the great scouts' exhibition to his honor Hajj Amin al-Husayni and his honor Raghīb Bek al-Nashashibi the president of the Defense Party [*Hizb al Difa*]. They were glad that the exhibition's organizers had distanced themselves from factionalism [*hizbiyyat*] so they could maintain real sportsmanship. But the people were greatly surprised when they learnt that His Honor Raghīb Bek did not attend the exhibition. I went today to Jerusalem and met with Mr. Rashad Shawwa. I asked him if Raghīb Bek had received an invitation, and he definitely denied it. In the evening when I met with Raghīb Bek in Jaffa, he repeatedly assured me that he had not received an invitation.<sup>18</sup>

In the same issue under the title "*al-Ittihad al-riyadī wal-hizbiyyat*" [the Sports Federation and Factionalism] the writer claimed that

... the Sports Federation in Palestine or in any other country in the world is one of the first to be isolated from any factionalism, because the ethical goal of the sports movement contradicts such a tendency. You will see that people like the British, for example, who are famous for their love for sports, are the farthest removed from factionalism. When the PSF called for its exhibition, which was held last Sunday, the country welcomed it as an athletic event, far removed from factionalism. The newspapers – no matter what party or faction they belong to – also welcomed it. ... We hope that the PSF will take these comments into consideration and accept them as issues from people who are concerned about the impartiality and non-partisanship of the PSF; otherwise everyone will be affected negatively.<sup>19</sup>

Within the various elite during the Mandate period, one primary rift stands out. This was the deep gulf between two groups that ironically were both sustained and encouraged, in different ways, by the British mandatory authorities. The first was made up of supporters of the "grand" mufti, Hajj Amin al-Husayni, who came to be known as the al-Husayni faction, or as *majlisiyun*, partisans of the Supreme Muslim Council [*al-Majlis al-Islami al-A'la*], the institution invented by the British. The second group was known as the *mu'aridun* [the opposition], and was headed by Raghīb Bek al-Nashashibi, whom the British had appointed mayor of Jerusalem after the Nabi Musa riots of 1920, replacing the Mufti's distant cousin, Musa Kazim al-Husayni.<sup>20</sup> In general, as Rashid Khalidi, noted "We are left with a picture of a Palestinian elite that was hopelessly divided internally, and many

of whose most prominent members had a variety of more or less entangling connections to the British overlords of the country, while some had links to the Zionists as well.”<sup>21</sup>

In those circumstances the Arab Youth Congress supported Hajj Amin al-Husayni, while *Filastin* sympathized with Raghīb Bek al-Nashashibi. Two issues stand out regarding the impact of these conflicts on Palestinian sports: the level of success of this exhibition, and the reason behind the nonparticipation of the majority of athletic clubs. The second will be a subject of a future study. In general, the idea of this exhibition reflected the awareness that holding sports and joint athletes-scouts exhibitions could be an effective factor for raising both these movements to higher levels. Their main goal was not merely mobilizing national sentiment, but also sending a clear message that Palestinians were able to organize exhibitions that are comparable to the Maccabiah. This exhibition was a good reflection of the level of coordination between the Palestine Sports Association, the Scouts Association, and the Youth Congress. Palestinian national politics never saw such a degree of cooperation and coordination among these three organizations as was achieved during the period 1932-1936.

Unfortunately, this cooperation and coordination was undermined by the outbreak of the 1936 Revolt.<sup>22</sup> It is worth mentioning that the Youth Congress had supported the Palestine Sports Federation as early as 1931. It helped in organizing the tournament of the “Youth Congress Trophy” [*Dir’ Mu’tamar al-Shabab*]. This tournament was the first one organized for the Arab football teams in Palestine.

The youth movement had attained a high level of organization and strength. This was attested in an official government report in 1935: “A significant factor of the Arab national movement has been the promotion of Arab boy scout groups and sports clubs and generally the stimulation of organizations of young men under one name or another. Towards the end of the year the younger elements had evidently gained ground, and were becoming a factor which might challenge the influence of the older Arab leaders.”<sup>23</sup>

Long before this, the British Mandate had warned about the spread of national tendencies into the athletic social clubs. In April 1921 *Filastin* published the following:

Last Saturday saw the inauguration and laying of the cornerstone of the Sports Club in Jerusalem. *The Palestine Weekly* mentioned that Mr. Storrs, the Governor of Jerusalem, insisted on the participation of everyone regardless of his religion or beliefs. *The [Palestine] Weekly* added that the partisan athletic clubs in Egypt were a factor in the turmoil there, so this mistake must not be repeated in Palestine.<sup>24</sup>

## **The Zionist Exploitation of Athletics**

Sports were a mirror that reflected the political and social conditions in Palestine. They were not immune to the political changes that swept over Palestine after WWI and until 1948. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Zionist establishment had been organizing sports-scouting exhibitions and field days. Zionist flags were raised and

national anthems played.<sup>25</sup> The Zionist leader Theodore Herzl stated in the opening of the first *Turntag* [Jewish Gymnastic Exhibition] in 1903 that “such a gymnastic exhibition is worth more than a hundred speeches.”<sup>26</sup> One of the very first such sports exhibitions was held in Rehoboth colony which was established near a site called Khirbet Deiran.<sup>27</sup> This exhibition started in 1908, and continued until 1914 when it was boycotted by the Maccabi Organization, which opposed the presence of Arab guards and workers who were employed in the colony.<sup>28</sup> During these military-style parades, Zionist flags would be raised while a music band would lead the marches through town and enthusiastic speeches would be given in Hebrew. A letter sent to *Filastin* on April 20, 1913 by an observer described one of these annual celebrations in the colony of Deiran [Rehoboth]:

At one o'clock in the afternoon the celebration procession came parading around the streets of the colony led by a music band and flying Zionist flags. They proceeded until they reached the house of the colony president, who came out onto the balcony of his house and gave a long speech in Hebrew. I understood from the numerous interruptions of applause that he was very well liked. After that the procession marched in formation through the streets of the colony, and it was an amazing spectacle due to the large number of participants. ... I was given the impression that this was a well-organized army, considering their skillful movements and discipline. Then they reached the field, and the formation halted. At the front of this agricultural field a large area was designated for athletic events. A number of speakers gave enthusiastic speeches and were met with approving applause by the crowd ... then the sports competitions and weightlifting started, and then horse racing, in which both men and women participated. Most of them wore Bedouin clothing; you would have thought they were Arabian warriors on horseback. ... Special trains carried back visitors who came from Jerusalem and Jaffa.

The Zionist flag was used as a symbol for inspiring national sentiments. It consisted of two equal horizontal stripes of white and blue bearing in the center the device known as the “Magen David,” a provocation that local Palestinian Arabs vigorously protested to the British authorities. This flag was flown at every athletic match, exhibition and field day.<sup>29</sup>

Since 1924, the Zionists have been trying to find new devices for admitting more Jewish immigrants into the country, using mostly smuggling and manipulation of the British commitment to the Balfour Declaration. They pretended to submit to the restrictions of the immigration laws while illegally bringing in Jews to reside in Palestine and hiding them in the settlements. The Maccabiad [Maccabiah], an international Jewish sports event often called the “Jewish Olympics,” was one of the ways of bringing in Jews who then never left. For the three years following 1933, Palestine saw an average of sixty thousand 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. The Maccabiah Games and the Levant Fair, an international trade fair held in Tel Aviv in the 1920s and 30s, were considered perfect opportunities to gain entry to the

country, bypassing British immigration restrictions.<sup>30</sup> The year 1935 alone, the high point of Jewish immigration before 1948, witnessed over sixty thousand Jewish immigrants, as many as the country's entire population in 1919. Without massive immigration the Zionist movement could not hope to claim majority status, dominate the Palestinians demographically, and could build a Jewish national home in Palestine.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the modest political potential of the proposed Arab exhibition, the Maccabiah Games included more participants and activities that accrued from effective cooperation between the Jewish athletic leadership and the Zionist establishment. Arab sports lagged behind Jewish sports, which relied on immigrants coming from industrial developed societies who brought with them the culture of sports. The *yishuv*, and the Zionist movement that represented it, in consequence, received powerful external support, both from many of its coreligionist elsewhere and from the greatest imperial power of the day, as well as from the League of Nations.<sup>32</sup> All the gauges of the economic, social, and political advancement of the *yishuv* – the massive import of capital, the inflow of highly skilled human capital, the community's predominantly urban nature, its high degree of ideological homogeneity, its unique social makeup and governing structures – when taken together, indicate its capacity for generating considerable state power.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

The sports exhibition discussed here came when there was an increase in the Jewish population from 185,000 in 1932 to 375,000 in 1935. This was accompanied by ever increasing land purchases by the Zionists, which the British continued to facilitate and encourage throughout the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> Even though the Palestinian exhibition was a reaction to political conditions and to the Maccabiah Games, it constituted a new step in perceiving sports and scouting as part of an enhanced national identity and consciousness. While the Youth Congress was not a political party, yet through sports, the scouting movement, and other activities it sought to prove that it could achieve what the other political parties had not. Obviously, these movements were aware that achieving national-political targets could not be accomplished without the integration of all other aspects: economic, social and cultural, which must include sports and scouting.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Issa al-Sifri, *Filastin bayn al-Intidab wa al-Sahyuniyya* [Palestine between the Mandate and Zionism ] (Jaffa: Maktabat Filastin al-Jadida, 1937), 194.
- 2 al-Sifri, *Filastin bayn al-Intidab wa al-Sahyuniyya*, 194-195. The Youth Congress organized a scouts rally in September 1934 which included horse riding.
- 3 Arab Palestinian Youth Congress (*Mu'tamar al-Shabab al-Arabi al-Falastini*) was established in Jerusalem in 1931. It was active in youth, scouting, sports, and political activities, and was known for its nationalistic tendencies. It held its first conference in 1932, the second in 1935. See al-Sifri, *Filastin bayn al-Intidab wa al-Sahyuniyya*, 194-201.
- 4 Issam Khalidi, "Al-Maccabiad, ... al-Sahyuniyya wa Istiqlal al-Riyada," *al-'Arabi* no. 548 (2007): 78-87. The event stirred Jewish nationalism and provided a means of introducing Jews to the future homeland. 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."
- 5 *al-Difa'*, 12 July 1935. Dr. Daoud al-Husayni and Mamdouh Nabils were the founders of the Islamic Sport Club in Jaffa. Haqqi Mazin was a dentist. His father was an officer in the Turkish army. At that time, he was the most popular boxing coach in Mandate Palestine.
- 6 In March 1926 the British authorities broadcast a statement requiring every society and club established in Palestine to be registered, whether its purpose was charitable or political.
- 7 *al-Difa'*, 3 July 1935.
- 8 *al-Difa'*, 12 July 1935.
- 9 al-Sifri, *Filastin bayn al-Intidab wa al-Sahyuniyya*, 201.
- 10 *al-Difa'*, 25 June 1935.
- 11 *al-Difa'*, 25 June 1935.
- 12 *al-Difa'*, 15 July 1935.
- 13 *al-Difa'*, 20 July 1935.
- 14 *Filastin*, 16 July 1935.
- 15 *al-Difa'*, 15 July 1935.
- 16 Husayn Husni, an Egyptian teacher, came to Palestine in the mid 1930s and worked as a teacher of physical education in different schools. He was one of the organizers of this field day. After the re-establishment of the Palestine Sport Association he participated in editing the sports column in *Filastin*.
- 17 *al-Difa'*, 15 July 1935.
- 18 *Filastin*, 18 July 1935.
- 19 *Filastin*, 18 July 1935.
- 20 Rashid Khalidi, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), 65-66.
- 21 Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, 80.
- 22 The PSF decided to set up a similar field day in 1936, but it was suspended due to the outbreak of the 1936 Revolt. It also attempted to organize a second exhibition in mid-1937.
- 23 <http://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/B672DC87B2D50447052565D4005173DF>, accessed 7 October 2015), and al-Sifri, *Filastin bayn al-Intidab wa al-Sahyuniyya*, 195.
- 24 *Filastin*, 12 April 1921.
- 25 Issam Khalidi, "Body and Ideology: Early Athletics in Palestine: 1900-1948," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 27 (2007): 44-58.
- 26 *Die Welt*, 29 August 1903, 16. Quoted in George Eisen, "The Maccabiah Games: a History of the Jewish Olympics", Diss., UM, 1979, 34.
- 27 Rehoboth (about 20 kilometers south of Tel Aviv) was established in 1890 by Polish Jewish immigrants. It was located near a site called Khirbat Deiran, which now lies in the center of the built-up area of the city. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rehovot>, accessed 5 October 2015.
- 28 *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. "Rehoboth" (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1972).
- 29 Issam Khalidi, "Sports and Aspirations: Football in Palestine 1900-948," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 58, (2014), 74-89. The executive committee of the Muslim and Christian Association sent the High Commissioner for Palestine a letter of protest against the flying of the Zionist flag at a football match held in Jerusalem on 12 January 1925 (*Filastin*, 20 January 1925), and asking whether the ordinance regulating the flying of flags issued by the Government of Palestine in August 1920, had been abrogated.
- 30 al-Sifri, *Filastin bayn al-Intidab wa al-Sahyuniyya*, 215-216.
- 31 Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, 11.
- 32 Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, 9.
- 33 Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*, 21.
- 34 Howar Sachar, *A History of Israel: From the Rise of Zionism to Our Time*, 3rd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 189.