MANDATORY BODYBUILDING: NATIONALISM, Masculinity, Class, AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN 1930S SYRIA

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By

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A NOTE ABOUT TRANSLATION

All translations are my own. I have tried to provide the Arabic in cases where I felt it would be helpful. I have relied on the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* transliteration style, not using diacritical marks other than the ‘ayn and hamza for proper names and titles of articles.
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INTRODUCTION

On May 14, 1937, the following headline ran on the front page of the Damascus daily newspaper *Al-Qabas*, the public voice of the powerful nationalist political conglomerate known as the National Bloc: “Order (*al-nizām*) is the basis of everything in the life of nations; the spirit of order is in Syria and the countries of the world!” The subtitle read, “It is necessary for the people to be trained (*yatadarrab*) to love order.” In the body of the editorial, the author more clearly defined *nizām* as “giving what is Caesar’s to Caesar and what is God’s to God and placing each individual in his place.”

Failing to respect this vision of order represented “a societal disease” which might very well lead to “evil consequences” such as “internal revolts.” More alarming for the author, who was writing after Syrians believed they had secured independence from France through an agreement with the French Front Populaire, such disorderly conditions might provide ample justification for colonial rule. The nation which did not respect order might invite foreign intervention. In sum, *nizām* constituted a teachable domestic social order deeply connected to membership in an international political order of nation-states. In this thesis, I will argue that over the course of the 1930s, this idea of *nizām* manifested itself in a distinctly corporeal way, linking bourgeois male bodies with the nation through physical activities that increasingly came under the purview of the state.

As part of this process, the football field, the school ground, the boxing ring, and the scouting camp functioned as important sites for displaying this vision of *nizām*, through which a place in a global environment was asserted and the power of male elites

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locally was consolidated.\(^2\) The trajectory of this story is one of increasing state and national control over the bodies of citizens. In the early years of the decade, sporting competitions emerged as mass spectator events, providing a register to measure the progress and advancement of localities and, to a lesser extent, nations. A broad group of scouting troops emerged, with shared goals of attracting middle- and upper-class young men to engage in expeditions across the country. By the mid-1930s, sporting events were being increasingly seen as performances of the nation and physical fitness as a national need. Writers called for government promotion of athletics and reclaimed authentic examples of physical prowess from antiquity. The contours of the emerging bodily reform project coincided with a national effort to save the peasant, which underscored both the elite nature of the national project and deep anxiety about the impact of urbanization upon this class.\(^3\) In relation to the national imperative of physical fitness, the peasant represented an oppositional figure, constituting the ancient essence of Syrian society that required the guidance of experts to be truly modern. As the quasi-independent Syrian government took an increasing amount of decision-making power from the French authorities, the notions of connections between strong male bodies and a strong nation that had percolated throughout the decade became institutionalized as part of government policy. As World War II began, a set of linkages between nation and

\(^2\) From the perspective of Al-Qabas, physical culture was essentially a male sphere. I found nothing explicitly criticizing women’s participation in athletic endeavors; however, I found nothing explicitly treating female sports either. Numerous scholars of gender have noted the relational nature of gender identities. My focus on men and male activities here is not meant to depart from this point but rather to focus on a particularly understudied oeuvre of cultural practice.

\(^3\) In this context, the peasant occupied a position of simultaneous familiarity – as the embodiment of national identity – and otherness – as a deficiently modern figure – with respect to urban elites. This approach to making the nation borrows from Timothy Mitchell’s reading of Homi Bhabha: “in the performative making of a nation…otherness plays a constitutive role.” Timothy Mitchell, Rule of Experts: Egypt, Technopolitics, Modernity (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 183.
middle- and upper-class men had converged in the realm of physical culture, endorsed by the government and accepted by a growing segment of the populace.

To study these developments, I will focus on the National Bloc’s daily newspaper, *Al-Qabas*, a text which presents fascinating insight into the world view of this elite political group. The National Bloc was a loose conglomeration of political notables opposed to the French presence in Syria yet deeply conservative in social and economic matters. Philip Khoury calls the entity “the most important political organization of the mandate era” and Elizabeth Thompson further qualifies the group as “not a political party, but rather an association of paternalistic elites.”⁴ The group consisted of wealthy urban men who, in many cases, were holding the same intermediary position between Paris and Damascus that they had held between Istanbul and Damascus for decades previously. As the main public organ of this elite political entity, the editorials and articles on the pages of the Damascus newspaper can be read as a record of the political and social imperatives of the National Bloc in a time period when its control of the national movement was imperiled by continuing French colonial rule and more radical subaltern groups within Syria.

In addition to shedding light on the National Bloc, the views presented in *Al-Qabas* circulated amongst the general public. *Al-Qabas*, of course, was not the only information source in Syria during this time period. In addition to the litany of local and regional newspapers, specialized athletic periodicals from neighboring countries were available as well. For example, the Cairo-based physical activity magazine *Al-Riyada al-

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Badaniyya had distribution agents in Damascus and Aleppo. Nevertheless, Al-Qabas remains significant both for its connection to the National Bloc and the fact that its circulation numbers likely exceeded specialized foreign periodicals such as Al-Riyada al-Badaniyya. Although I have been unable to find circulation figures for the Al-Qabas, the newspaper possessed enough significance as the mouthpiece of the National Bloc to be closed several times by French authorities. Additionally, while it is important to remember the elitist nature of literacy in this context, the reading public for newspapers was somewhat more expansive than the literate public. The ideas about physical fitness and male bodies presented in Al-Qabas, then, were distributed to some degree amongst urban Damascenes.

The importance of Al-Qabas notwithstanding, the use of the newspaper also has some limitations. After all, the source much more frequently reveals the speeches and editorials of numerous leaders imploring the masses to train their bodies for the sake of the nation rather than the groans of the individual Syrian sweating in pursuit of this objective. In his study of Egypt’s army under Mehmed Ali, Khaled Fahmy refers to this dilemma as being “shouted at constantly by the Pasha to write at his dictation and at the same time being denied the real voice of the soldier.” Fahmy’s struggle with this issue is partially motivated by his critique of Timothy Mitchell’s Colonising Egypt, which

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7 Ami Ayalon has argued that the use of oral-aural idioms (i.e. “I have phrased my words in my statement, offering it to the people, so they can hear it,” “Listen to what they are saying about us”) in Palestinian press in the early twentieth century suggests that articles were read aloud in public spaces such as coffee houses perhaps more often than they were read independently. Thompson estimates the total newspaper-reading public of Syria and Lebanon at 250,000 in 1930. Ami Ayalon, Reading Palestine: Printing and Literacy, 1900-1948 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 140-141. Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 230.
Fahmy believes too easily accepts the sources’ own claims of power, resulting in the presentation of “an ideal world…in which every action is controlled” rather than a world where state power is constantly challenged and resisted.\(^9\) Bearing this critique in mind, my claim in this thesis is not that the increasingly government-supported project to build Syrian bodies was unchallenged.\(^10\) Nor is it that every person understood their physical fitness in terms of the nation. Rather, my argument – in part – is that this particular discourse provided key insights into the gender and class dimensions of the nationalist project at this time.\(^11\)

I do not, however, intend to limit this thesis to describing discursive practices; the treatment of physical activity in *Al-Qabas*, after all, referred to literal practices as well. Lacking sources that might provide evidence of the actual membership of athletic clubs, I cannot speak definitively about the economic characteristics of the participants in these activities, aside from noting a few measures that clearly curbed the inclusion of the poor. Yet the sources do reveal the perception of a common social outlook among these activities’ practitioners. In many cases, the calls for improved athleticism mentioned or were addressed to the “cultured youth (*al-shabāb al-muthaqaf*),” who seemed to be either

\(^10\) Even in works that have the source material to make claims about responses to these prescribed activities, the hegemonic project is never complete. Looking at early-twentieth century Canada, Howell writes that the “hope of extending bourgeois hegemony was never realized. Working people, ethnic minorities, capitalist promoters, crooked speculators, gamblers, and others were intent on making sport conform to their own particular needs. No one group could ever make sport simply an extension of its own will, however reasonable its vision might be.” Colin Howell, *Blood, Sweat, and Cheers: Sport and the Making of Modern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 52.
\(^11\) This project might also be seen as a historical “thick description,” an attempt at “explication” of some of the “webs of significance” of this time and place. Clifford Geertz, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in *The Interpretation of Culture* (New York: Basic Books Publishers, 1973), 5-6.
ensconced in secondary schools or the rising urban professional classes.\textsuperscript{12} Several recent studies of Syrian history have similarly treated class as a marker of a certain cultural orientation in addition to a reflection of economic conditions.\textsuperscript{13} From the articles of Al-Qabas, it seems that at least some portions of the middle and upper strata of Syrian society at this time embraced the model of national masculinity inscribed in the forms of physical culture promoted by the nationalist elite. A close reading of Al-Qabas reveals much about the nationalist elite; the discourse of physical activity also took on literal manifestations, especially in the lives of the middle and upper strata of society.

The context of the 1930s presented a number of urgent reasons for the nationalist elite to attempt to direct performances of niẓām for international and local audiences. While they worked to expel the French throughout the mandate, their politics possessed a distinctly conservative tenor, seeking to maintain the “local status quo” with respect to economics and social relations in particular.\textsuperscript{14} But as the French departure became imminent, trade unions, young pan-Arabists, and women increasingly challenged the Bloc’s economic and political power. Agricultural difficulties caused unprecedented numbers of peasants to flood the cities, fundamentally changing urban space. The residue of French divide-and-rule tactics meant that the allegiance of Armenians, Circassians, and Assyrians to a unified nation remained in doubt. Furthermore, the

\textsuperscript{12} The term might be seen as an analogue to the figure of the effendi in Egypt, which Jacob uses to refer to “a distinct field of cultural practices and social position that while shaped within a particularly Egyptian context bore many similarities to a global middle class.” Jacob, “Working Out Egypt,” 9n16.

\textsuperscript{13} Watenpaugh’s effort is perhaps most notable in this regard, positing that the defining characteristic of middle-class life in early twentieth century Aleppo was a “commitment to being modern.” Looking at advertising and consumer culture in post-independence Syria, Kevin Martin discerns a related progressive outlook, defining the “bourgeoisie” as “urban, literate (both in the generic sense and culturally), formally educated beyond the norm, and, most importantly, future-oriented.” Keith Watenpaugh, Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 8. Kevin Martin, “Enter the future! Exemplars of bourgeois modernity in post-World War II Syria” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2005), 14.

\textsuperscript{14} Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 6.
ongoing debates over the status of the sanjak of Alexandretta made the specter of national dismemberment very real. While Khoury emphasizes the “remarkable degree of continuity in the exercise of local political power” between the late Ottoman period and the mandate in his study of the politics of the French mandate, he also stresses the important changes taking place: loyalties shifted from the quarter, market, and mosque to the school, syndicate, and political party.\textsuperscript{15} This study is an effort to trace some of these changes. For all of the political stagnation of the 1930s, the decade proved crucial in establishing a framework that extended into the post-independence period. This work aims to show how in response to all of the noted threats to their grip on power, the nationalist elites responded with a new way of talking and, to some extent, a new way of acting, which transformed bourgeois male bodies into symbols and determinants of national development.

In making this argument, I hope to illuminate two key themes about the nature of the mandate period. First, even as I make some claims about the creation of a Syrian nation, I want to emphasize the permeability of borders, avoiding the sin of overstating the power of state boundaries only recently imposed on the region.\textsuperscript{16} From time to time, I will note how developments in Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt compared with Syria. While my evidence in this respect does not provide information about the regional networks of activists who sustained these processes, the sources suggest that a great deal of borrowing and translation occurred between newly independent nations and mandate nationalist

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 619.
\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Watenpaugh’s critique of “a narrative structure” that “reifies the Franklin Bouillon Line between Republican Turkey and French Mandate Syria – the path of which merely traces a ceasefire line determined by a railroad bed – into a relevant cultural and ideological boundary.” Watenpaugh, \textit{Being Modern in the Middle East}, 182.
activists. The relationship between the colonial metropole and the periphery is important; so, too, is the relationship between the peripheries.\textsuperscript{17} Second, I would like to stress the importance of the mandate arrangement for framing these particular bodily responses and projects. Displaying Syria’s credentials for statehood with rippling muscles on the athletic field or exquisite self-control during the scouting expedition were alternative places for performing nationhood and claiming statehood denied. Manhood figured prominently in these efforts.

Historians have put forward many accounts of the rise of nationalism; this account is most closely attuned to its manifestations in the politics of the everyday. Michael Billig articulates a similar idea with his notion of “banal nationalism.”\textsuperscript{18} Viewing the omnipresent American flag in the United States as the paragon of this concept, he argues that “national identity in established nations is remembered because it is embedded in routines of life, which constantly remind, or ‘flag’, nationhood.”\textsuperscript{19} Of course, the Syrian case represents a nation establishing its nationhood through these processes rather than reminding its citizens of its establishment. From this perspective, Syrian sports, scouting, and physical education, then, are part of what Mitchell calls “the more mundane and uncertain process of producing the nation,” which he more broadly defines as “the variety

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{17} This is to add some nuance to Watenpaugh’s subsequent point “that nationalism has its origins in the West and has spread to the non-West.” This statement might obscure the disruptions and translations involved in this spread. This claim is also to ignore fascinating work placing the origins of nationalism and more general notions of Western and non-Western not solely in the West but in encounters often outside of the West. In Mitchell’s words, “it might be better to propose that it was in the building of slave factories in Martinique, prisons in the Crimea, and schools in Calcutta that the decisive nature of the distinction between European and non-European was fixed.” Watenpaugh, \textit{Being Modern in the Middle East}, 183. Timothy Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” in \textit{Questions of Modernity}, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 3.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Michael Billig, \textit{Banal Nationalism} (London: Sage, 1995).
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 38.
\end{itemize}
of efforts, projects, encounters, and struggles in which the nation and its modern identity are staged and performed.”

The particularities of the Syrian staging and performance of the nation represent important counterparts to previous treatments of physical culture in Europe as a strand of popular culture situated more in local social conditions rather than international political dynamics. In *Sport, Power, and Culture*, for example, John Hargreaves notably applies the methodologies of Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci to the realm of physical culture, conceiving of “sport as an object of struggle, control and resistance, that is an arena for the play of power relations.” Hargreaves, who focuses on Britain, generally considers athletics as a window into class conflict. Class is an important part of the story of Syrian sport. The discourse on physical activity utilized class-coded language to make clear whose bodies were to be reformed. But the Syria’s status as a mandate under French colonial rule in the interwar period meant that assertions of class were almost always made as a credential of nation-statehood as part of the international political order, essentially connecting domestic social order with membership in a world community of nations. In this sense, Syrian spectator sports in the 1930s functioned to some extent like the spectacles Afshin Marashi describes in late Qajar Iran, which were essentially performances for “two audiences, one international and one domestic.” With respect to the “international audience,” these ceremonies were “intended to convey the equal status of the semicolonial states and thus discourage further imperial encroachments.” With respect to the “domestic audience,” Marashi views these “public

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spectacles” as constitutive parts of making the “state as the main focus of domestic
loyalty, providing a basis of modern identity in an age when social forces were producing
rival and centrifugal identifications.” The crux of my analysis is a combination of
Hargreaves’s understanding of the importance of class and power relations in physical
activities with Marashi’s notion of the dual audiences of these performances.

On a regional level, an increasing number of fascinating works examine the
interface of gender and class as part of nationalism yet masculinity has for the most part
remained in the background. Lila Abu-Lughod’s edited volume Remaking Women:
Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East is a great example of such efforts. But few
of these works have treated the connection between masculinity and nation. Two works
– Asfaneh Najmabadi’s Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards and Joseph
Massad’s Desiring Arabs – have touched on this topic somewhat indirectly through an
examination of sexuality and the imposition of a binary, heteronormative framework on
Iran and the Arab world, respectively. While Najmabadi and Massad succeed in a
creative use of sources to indicate change in this matter over time, more work is needed
to display the on-the-ground technologies which brought about these changes. Wilson
Jacob’s dissertation “Working Out Egypt” is a notable exception in this field. Examining
physical culture in Egypt at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth
century, Jacob demonstrates that “refocusing the historical lens on the performance

22 Afshin Marashi, Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940 (Seattle: University of
23 Tamar Mayer makes this same point in his edited volume Gender Ironies of Nationalism, attributing the
relative lack of scholarship on masculinity and the nation to “Women's Studies' tendency until recently to
concentrate on recovering women's experience, without necessarily positioning it in the larger context of
gender construction, and from the unmarked status of masculinity within the nation and in nationalist
discourse.” Tamar Mayer, “Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Setting the Stage,” in Gender Ironies of
of...masculinity...illuminates a field of political and social becoming” that reflects on individual experiences of nationalism, modernity, and colonialism.\textsuperscript{24}

The growing consideration of gender and class as part of the nation-making process extends to the history of French mandate Syria, too, where a number of works have inserted subaltern groups into the standard political narrative. Philip Khoury’s \textit{Syria and the French Mandate} remains the authoritative work on the conventional nationalist politics of the time period. Subsequently, a number of authors have attempted to color Khoury’s grand political narrative by injecting subaltern groups into the story. In \textit{Divided Loyalties}, James Gelvin discusses popular challenges to elite definitions of nationalism in the Faysali years; Elizabeth Thompson shows how women and workers challenged patriarchal political elites in \textit{Colonial Citizens}; Michael Provence demonstrates the importance of rural groups to the formation of a sense of Syrian nation in \textit{The Great Syrian Revolt and the Rise of Arab Nationalism}; and Keith Watenpaugh attempts to write the middle class of Aleppo into Syrian history in \textit{Being Modern in the Middle East}.\textsuperscript{25} Thompson does the most of all of these authors to examine the interface between gender and class. Yet the breadth of her project – as one that examines the multiple subaltern challenges to colonial and indigenous patriarchies – precludes her from in-depth analysis of the discursive and practical importance of physical activity as part of a male national body-building project in the late 1930s.

\textsuperscript{24} Jacob, “Working out Egypt,” 192.
I have already noted that this project will attempt to present some of the regional dimensions of these developments in physical culture; there is also, of course, an obvious international wrinkle, none other than the emergence of fascism across much of the globe. Both Thompson and Watenpaugh attend to the linkages between 1930s Syrian youth organizations and fascist groups in Spain, Italy, and Germany, yet they also note the particular class and gender dynamics of the movement within Syria. Thompson treats the gendered aspect of the scouting movement and proto-fascist groups. Noting how the groups presented themselves as “paternalistic guardians of women,” she suggests that these movements were effects of what she calls the broader “crisis of paternity,” wherein “elite nationalists posed as true fathers” of the nation in response to subjugation by the French and challenges from women’s and populist movements.26 While Watenpaugh mentions the broader international context of numerous bands of toughs parading urban spaces in color-coordinated shirts, he sees the manifestations of the phenomenon in Syria in class terms: “the specific impulse to use these forms grew from the desire of a traditional elite masquerading as nationalists to contain forces and groups increasingly outside the locus of its control.”27 Following both of these examples, I do not wish to deny the importance of international circuits of fascist diffusion in the emergence of these groups. However, I find it more useful and interesting to look at the ways these forms translated to Syria and what social exigencies might have contributed to their power.

In fleshing out these developments, I will divide this thesis into five chapters. In the first, my main concern is the development of a public athletic sphere that shifted from a site for measuring local degrees of modernity to performing national visions of unity. I

26 Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 196, 287.
27 Watenpaugh, Being Modern in the Middle East, 255-256.
will argue that a clear class hierarchy accompanied the shift to conceiving of fitness as a national imperative. In the second chapter, I will continue my discussion of the ways in which class and nation interfaced with an examination of the scouting movement. In the third part, I will discuss a series of athletic biographies presented in *Al-Qabas*. I will interpret the presentation of modern and ancient figures with an eye toward their relation to a notion of national athletics and subsequent calls for government support of athletic programming. In the fourth chapter, my focus will move from the cramped stadiums of the city to the famine-stricken villages of the countryside to analyze the class and technopolitical dimensions of a rural development project originated at the American University of Beirut (AUB) and subsequently adopted in Syria. I will show the peasant as an unstable figure, simultaneously the pillar of Arab society but also requiring the guidance of elites. In the fifth chapter, I will bring all of these dynamics together as I examine the physical culture of the late 1930s, when the new nationalist government fully brought many of these diffuse ideas and institutions under state control and regulation.

Throughout the thesis, I will argue that during the 1930s, the nationalist elite’s goal of strengthening social order domestically and asserting a place in a community of nation-state globally affected notions of manhood in profound way by equating the physical performance of the individual with the metaphysical performance of the nation.
CHAPTER 1
FROM DAMASCUS TO SYRIA: ATHLETIC CONTESTS AND SOCIAL ORDER
IN 1930S SYRIA

In this chapter, I will analyze the ways in which athletic contests changed from being presented as registers of local modernity to performances of national progress underpinned by a clear social hierarchy. In the early 1930s, press coverage of athletic events demonstrated a keen concern for the international esteem of Damascus. The articles also showed a tendency to look to regional beacons such as Egypt or rivals such as Beirut for measurement of progress or confirmation of achievement. Additionally, the coverage of athletic contests provided a vantage for viewing men’s bodies as objects. Many stories commented on the proportion and form of the players’ figures. Yet for the most part these bodies were not seen in national terms. Even as writers looked to other nations as embodiments of advancement, they nevertheless generally remained interested in how these ideas related to the locality of Damascus rather than the totality of some national idea.¹ As these games occurred, a combination of press attention, politicians’ participation, and mass spectatorship underscored the development of an environment in which athletics was watched and discussed. At the same time as public attention to athletics grew, some writers and theorists posited a close relationship between physical fitness and the anti-colonial struggle, increasingly utilizing a national frame of reference in this respect. From the vantage of Al-Qabas, male bodies were slowly becoming enmeshed in the effort both to symbolize and achieve national progress. As the decade

¹ By chronicling the prevalence of local rather than national identifications, I do not intend to ascribe a certain teleology to the nation. Rather, my intention is to counter the understanding of nationalism as inevitable by pointing out other modes of identification.
wore on and upstart nationalist organizations challenged the National Bloc’s hold on power, athletic contests became venues where the individual body was associated with national needs, often in front of diverse spectatorships. The players, however, probably still hailed from the bourgeoisie. In cases of disorder, such as, for example, when a brawl occurred at a boxing match, observers deployed a class-infused language of propriety to criticize these excesses. In the span of a few years, athletic contests shifted from being described in local terms to national terms. Moreover, the evolution of athletics as spectator events underscored the relevance of class to these endeavors: if athletics were national performances, middle- and upper-class men were the actors and the rest of society was the audience.

Upheaval characterized Damascene politics in 1931 and 1932 and the National Bloc struggled to remain above the fray. Rumblings of King Faysal ascending to the throne drove much of this strategy. After a September 1931 meeting with the Director General of the Quai d’Orsay, Faysal believed the French authorities looked favorably upon an Iraqi-Syrian union under his rule. Either Faysal misunderstood or the French lied. Whatever the case, the monarchic rumors sowed disunity among the nationalist ranks in the lead up to the elections of 1932. Radical pan-Arabists and conservative royalists supported Faysal. Fearing a loss of power, the National Bloc elites, however, “worked to upset Faysal’s project for a Syrian throne.” Thus in a veritable flood of pan-Arab public activities, the leaders of the Bloc declined to participate for fear of playing into Faysal’s hand. The National Bloc notables absented themselves from demonstrations in April 1931 against Italian aggression in Libya and a 6 May

2 Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 354.
3 Ibid., 359.
commemoration of martyrs hanged by the Turks. The leadership of a boycott of the Damascus Electricity Company – which lasted for much of 1931 - fell outside of the hands of the National Bloc. Even amid the violence and fraud encouraged by the French in December 1931, the Bloc “did their utmost to refrain from exciting public feelings.”

When a government finally formed in June 1932, National Bloc leaders held two of the three cabinet positions, under the leadership of two French-backed politicians. In office, Jamil Mardam maintained the “honorable cooperation policy” of the Bloc, not attending the 24 July commemoration of Maysalun, an annual ceremony in remembrance of the 1920 French defeat of Faysali forces.

Within this environment, international athletic competition provided a means of comparing cities and nations, often based on European endorsement of progress. On February 10, 1931, the football club of the Egyptian University visited Damascus for a match against the local Bardi athletic club. The reputation of Egypt as an internationally recognized member of the world community and the accoutrements of a full-fledged nation-state preceded it. The squad featured not only the greatest Egyptian players but also some of the greatest players in the world. Utilizing European appreciation as the arbiter of athletic quality, an article in Al-Qabas extolled players such as Mahmud Mukhtar, who “stunned Europeans with his artistic play and his strong kicks.”

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4 Ibid., 373.
5 Ibid., 380.
6 Al-Qabas, “Al-Jami’a al-misriyya talaqi bardi,” 10 February 1931, 2. Though I begin this story with this match, I do not wish to present February of 1931 as the starting point of athletics in Syria. Scouting troops and athletic clubs emerged throughout the 1920s. I begin here primarily because of 1931 as a nexus of increasing National Bloc prominence and increasing significance of sporting events as mass spectator events.
7 In a study of Egyptian press coverage of football in the 1920s, Lopez noticed a comparable concern with European perceptions of Egyptian skill, referring to the dynamic as “an intense preoccupation with the
players had also acquitted themselves well on an international stage, participating in the Egyptian delegation to the 1928 Olympics. In facing the “best and strongest team to visit Syria,” the odds were against Bardi. But the game itself was important. The reporter wrote that “this game will be like a measure of the athletic games (ka-mizān al-ala’āb al-riyādiyya) in Damascus and Egypt.”

In addition to providing a means of comparing the athletic prowess of respective geographic areas, the game also provided a spectator event for engaging local rivalries. Noting that the attendance at one of the Egyptian team’s earlier games in Beirut reached 3,000 despite rain, Al-Qabas stated, “We are confident that the youth in Damascus will not be less interested than the youth in Beirut.” In addition to a local competitiveness, the report underscored the growing importance of athletics in the public sphere. The article blustered that such an event might not be seen again for “ten years.” The tone of hyperbole and excitement continued with a closing promise “that whoever misses this game will be overcome with regret for the length of his life.” Athletic competitions were attaining prominence as popular performances, well-attended by spectators and well-publicized by the press alike.

Regardless of the feelings of absentees, the result of the match itself provided an important register for Damascene advancement. Having “raised the head of Egypt high” through “beautiful playing” against the American University in Beirut’s team the day

8 The first iteration of the modern Olympic games, spearheaded by the Frenchman Pierre de Coubertin, occurred in 1896 in Athens. Over the first few decades of the century, participation in the event became “a necessary marker of nationhood, a standard means of representing national identity to both domestic and foreign audiences.” Barbara Keys, Globalizing Sport: National Rivalry and International Community in the 1930s (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 17.
before, the Egyptian side arrived at 2:00 in the afternoon in Damascus.\(^9\) The Egyptians took a 2-1 lead in the second half and secured victory after a shot on goal by Bardi erred due to the windy and rainy conditions. The coverage of the game emphasized the prominent role of Egypt’s internationally recognized players in the match. Despite defeat, writers considered Bardi’s near tie against an internationally recognized talent to be important. Various reports repeated this result as a marker of Damascene progress and ability. Even as the article noted Egyptian athletic prowess, the writer avoided fully conceiving of the contests in national terms, comparing Damascus with other entities rather than Syria with other entities.

As *Al-Qabas* exhortations to the Damascus youth to attend the match between Bardi and Egypt demonstrated, a clear rivalry existed between Beirut and Damascus. Both the competitive relationship between the Levantine cities and the use of Egypt as a marker of progress appeared in coverage of a game between Bardi and Beirut’s Salam club in April of 1931.\(^{10}\) Bardi triumphed in a dominating fashion, scoring four goals and taking over ten shots on goal. The story commented that the final score served as a proper rejoinder to the “arrogance (*taṭawul*) of the modern Beirut clubs” toward Damascus in general. Although this comment again underscored the rivalry between Damascus and Beirut, the rivalry remained on the level of cities rather than nations. In closing, the brief article reminded the reader that “the team which almost tied with the elite of the Egyptian University…is not defeated with ease.” Transforming Bardi’s defeat at the hands of the Egyptian side to a near-tie, the article also reinforced the place of Egypt as the standard of excellence.

\(^{10}\) *Al-Qabas*, “Bardi wa-l-salam,” 22 April 1931, 3.
Egypt continued to hold this place – often with the ratification of Europe – as writers connected sporting success with national progress and politicians took more interest in athletic contests. In a preview of a match between Bardi and Mu‘awiyya, Al-Qabas mentioned the founder of the latter club, recognizing “the famous notable Mr. Khalid al-‘Azm…rendered to this country a great service realized by all who know the value of athletic games and their influence on the progress of peoples and their decline.”¹¹ According to the author, regional developments confirmed this relationship between athletic prowess and civilizational advancement: “the European world did not recognize Egypt and did not appreciate its progress except thanks to athletics.”¹² Invoking Egypt as a standard of excellence and, again, European recognition as the confirmation of this progress, the author attested to the civilizational import of athletics. Local actors appeared to recognize this dynamic, too. For the upcoming match at Mu‘awiyya’s stadium on Baghdad Street, the great nationalist leader Ibrahim Hananu put forward a silver trophy to be awarded to the game’s winner, which Al-Qabas called unprecedented.¹³ The newspaper described Hananu’s decision to provide a trophy as drive by a desire “to enliven the athletic games and encourage the efforts of athletics

¹¹ Al-Qabas, “Mu‘awiyya wa bardi ‘ala ka’s hananu,” 6 December 1931, 3. Al-‘Azm also worked toward Syria’s industrial progress. Hailing from the famous Damascus family, he served as the Director of the National Cement Company beginning in 1930. From 1941 until 1943 he was Syria’s head of state.
¹² Athletics was not merely a primitive substitute for failing to measure up to Europe in other areas of national achievement. Rather, it was seen as an essential component of national power. For example, “Social Darwinists who saw life as a struggle among races and nations argued that physical strength was the key to the ‘survival of the fittest’ for human societies. And in an era of mass conscription, the health and fitness of individual men was directly tied to military power.” Keys, Globalizing Sport, 20.
¹³ Newspaper stories about athletic contests in Damascus at this time typically began with a description of prominent political figures in attendance. Egyptian press coverage of athletics in the 1920s was similar: “coverage of Olympic contests usually began with a list of those Egyptian dignitaries who attended the matches in person…by simply noting the presence of notable Egyptians…Al-Ahram’s coverage placed Egypt’s football fortunes squarely in the field of politics.” Lopez, “Football as National Allegory,” 292.
which have begun to ripen in Damascus.” While the article’s points about al-‘Azm’s contribution to the national revival, the role of athletics in the perception of national progress, and Hananu’s interest in the contest attested to the growing importance of athletics in national politics, the paper’s coverage of the event continued to limit the athletic movement to the city of Damascus rather than attach it to a larger nation.

The game itself demonstrated the importance of the athletic contest as a spectator event. The newspaper claimed to be “unable to describe the beauty of” the arrangements that Mu‘awiyya had made in their stadium. Before the game, the “famous athlete” Mahmud al-Bahrah entertained the crowd of 1,500 with his very beautiful gymnastics. As the teams warmed up prior to the match, Khalid al-‘Azm, whom the paper described as the “leader of the new athletic revival,” placed the Hananu cup prominently on the sideline. “Photographers hurried to take pictures” of the arrangements; “all were waiting the beginning of the game impatiently.” In the game, Mu‘awiyya triumphed, receiving the Hananu Cup from Fa‘iz Khuri, a Deputy within the National bloc political conglomeration.

At the same time as football matches became spectator events entangled in the local and, to some extent, national performance of progress, bodily health and athletic knowledge apparently functioned as a means of resistance to mandate military authorities. After a visit to Damascus, the Beiruti journalist Yusuf Yazbak marveled about the power of the young people of the city. He more specifically described these young people as the “patriotic students together…and the patriots varying between 27

15 “Quwwat al-shabab fi dimashq,” 20 December 1931, Al-Qabas, p. 4. Yazbak was a founding member of the Lebanese Communist Party. Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 29.
and 35 years.” According to Yazbak, this group directed the national body: “they are the head which controls the masses.” Describing the numerous demonstrations that the youth led, Yazbak wrote that in response to the “rifles and bullets” of the police, the “students” learned to walk “athletically.” Yazbak elaborated on the meaning, claiming that the students “became good in boxing hits (lakam būks)” and other self-defense techniques. Yazbak concluded his article by cheering bodily sacrifice for the nation, nodding to the “Syrian youth who presents his chest as authorizations to the rifles of the soldier…and his body of tender skin to the holes of prison.” Whether in the symbolic struggle of athletics or the literal national struggle of street fights, young men were dedicating their bodies for a cause, and for Yazbak, the cause was understood in national terms.

Perhaps less openly combative, football competitions also provided settings where the bodies of men were viewed and appreciated. A January 1932 match between Mu’awiyah and the Beirut club al-Nahda underscored this point. On a Sunday afternoon in Beirut’s Mar Ilyas Stadium at around 3:00, the Mu’awiyah club entered the stadium “in its gleaming white shirts and its well-proportioned beautiful bodies (ajsāmahu al-mu’atadala al-jamīlā).” The Al-Qabas reporter was not the only spectator to feel this way. A member of the crowd reportedly remarked, “We have not yet seen a team like Mu'awiyah in terms of its bodies and the quality of its appearance.” Despite their good

16 Timothy Mitchell describes a similar metaphor in his discussion of public health controls in late twentieth-century Egypt: “the body was to be treated as a physical machine, and disease as a mechanical process of cause and effect.” Here, Yazbak treats the social body as an enterprise controlled by elites. Mitchell, Colonising Egypt, 99.
form, Mu’awiyya ended up falling in the match by a score of two to one, though not without considerable controversy over the officiating.

The chastisement of the match’s referee by *Al-Qabas* bespoke the continued rivalry of Damascus and Beirut as well as notions of sportsmanship that emerged in athletics. The article began and closed with the referee, a young man named Pierre Gemayel. His tribulations consumed much of the article, too. The reason for the ire directed at him were two questionable offside calls against Mu’awiyya and a non-call on Nahda, nullifying two goals for the Damascene club and allowing a goal for Nahda. Notions of sportsmanship figured prominently in the entire episode. The problem with Gemayel, according to the article, was not simply his “ignorance” but also his “bad athletic spirit.” The author continued to attack Gemayel: “he volunteered for the face of Satan – to fight the Mu’awiyya team for nothing except that this team is from Damascus and the opposing team is from Beirut.” In the author’s view, the sporting spirit entailed dropping local attachments in the name of neutrality. In contrast to Gemayel’s condemned partisanship, Mu’awiyya’s acceptance of Gemayel’s judgments without complaint represented good sportsmanship. In response to the calls of offside against

18 This Pierre Gemayel was the very same man who would later attain prominence as the leader of the Maronite Christian Kataeb Party, also known as the Phalange. One of the key influences in the founding of this group was Gemayel’s visit to the 1936 Olympics in Berlin as the captain of the Lebanese national football team. There he was impressed with the “discipline” of the German Nazis and Italian Fascists. Robert Fisk, *Pity the Nation: Lebanon at War*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65. A rather fawning biography, moreover, notes – in an assessment that denizens of Mu’awiyya would surely quibble with – that as a young man he was “le premier arbitre international du monde arabe” in football. Jacques Nantet, *Pierre Gemayel* (Paris: J.C. Lattés, 1986), 20.

19 The issue of the identity of referees proved to be a flashpoint in Egypt as well. Lopez notes that “in a country where foreign governments retained extraterritorial legal rights, and at a time when the competency to administer justice was seen as a fundamental aspect of a modern nation, the fact that Egyptians rarely officiated matches even in their own country had been a source of considerable discussion in the Egyptian press for years.” Lopez, “Football and National Allegory,” 297. For more on the politics of sports officiating, see Laura Fair, *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890-1945* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 244-246.
Mu‘awiyya, the club did not complain but rather displayed “the patience of Job (bi-sabr Ayub)” and continued playing, displaying a “tolerance” that “shocked” the crowd. The final non-call by Gemayel, which enabled the Nahda victory, pushed Mu‘awiyya over the edge, however; they withdrew from the game before its conclusion in protest. These events bolstered the claim of article’s headline, which despite the official score stated that Mu‘awiyya defeated Nahda. The author of the article summarized the situation: “Mu‘awiyya returned winning in my view and the view of the onlooking crowd and the view of reality.”

In addition to taking place on the club level, athletic contests occurred on an interscholastic basis, making clear an effort to inculcate sporting values in high school students. A February article publicized a match between the teams of two secondary schools, the Tajhiz and the Laique school, in pursuit of the Damascus secondary school championship. A didactic tone pervaded the story, revealing again the role of international recognition as a legitimizer of modern practice. The author wrote, “Indeed, the custom undertaken in all the countries of the world over is that every school supports its team and encourages it in games to win the cup.” The article continued, stressing the importance of the spectator as part of the event: “Thus, we believe that the students will accept a strong interest in this game to encourage their comrades, especially because

20 To describe the “offside” penalty that Gemayel allegedly willfully ignored or imposed in the game, the newspaper simply transliterated the English term into Arabic as “awf said.” Morris similarly observes the “very common use of English sports terminology” in Chinese sports at this time. He places this phenomenon in the realm of mimicry, helping Chinese youth to feel capable of “an entirely new frontier of sportsmanship, fair play, and all that was sporting about the fabulous West.” The evident use of an English term in Arab sport and, moreover, the amplification of this usage through publication in a newspaper – to say nothing of the broader dynamic of comprehensively adopting foreign training methods – might reflect a similar dynamic. Andrew Morris, Marrow of the Nation: a History of Sport and Physical Culture in Republican China (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004), 53, 55.
encouraging has a big influence on the result of the game.” Although the newspaper failed to report on the result of this match, Al-Qabas did describe the championship match of this tournament.22 The match between Tajhiz and Farir was described as emblematic of the “athletic awakening of the schools and their interest in athletic affairs and their concern with progress in it.” Together, all of these events and their presentation made clear the development of athletics on a scholastic level in addition to the club level.

The propagation of sport in schools did not necessarily coincide with a more class-inclusive physical culture.23 Although Syria’s educational infrastructure had grown considerably since Ottoman times, chronic under-funding of education by mandate authorities hamstrung more extensive reforms. In the early 1930s, the entirety of Syria had fourteen government-run secondary schools.24 Reforms made these schools more accessible to non-elites by accepting boarding students, reducing entry fees, and exempting some students from fees altogether. Still, Khoury claims that “education during the mandate retained its elitist status…this was patently obvious in a country where in 1931…only 4 percent of the population had a secondary school education.”25 If the socio-economic profile of the school boy athletes vaguely resembled the socio-economic profile of school boys in general, high school students whose athletic triumphs began to cover the pages of Al-Qabas hailed from primarily middle- and upper-class backgrounds.

As the athletic season continued, matches made clear the role of athletics as public spectacles that interested large groups of consumers and the continued use of

23 In addition to not being class-inclusive, secondary schools were not gender-inclusive.
24 Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 410.
25 Ibid., 411.
athletics to validate local self-esteem. In April, Mu‘awiyya faced a group of professors from the AUB in competition. On Friday the 8\textsuperscript{th}, the squad of professors “in their red shirts” entered the stadium of Mu‘awiyya.\textsuperscript{26} The crowd filled not only the stadium but also some of the high neighboring floors. The author claimed that this impressive attendance was all the more so given “the interest of the audience in the events of the elections,” referring to the national contests that brought a new government into power in June. Part of the reason for the overflowing crowd might have been curiosity over a novel technology being used. The recently-established Harmun Cinema Company planned to film the game and project the images of the crowd and the game on a white screen near the stadium.\textsuperscript{27} The entire affair apparently impressed the professors. One remarked to the \textit{Al-Qabas} reporter “that Beirut was not expecting to see in Damascus a stadium such as this.”\textsuperscript{28} While this result of the match enabled Damascus to bask in the esteem of modern Beirut, the result on the field was less decisive: the game ended in a tie. Subsequently, both teams met for a tea party held by the president of the Mu‘awiyya club, which \textit{Al-Qabas} described as “among the most beautiful parties held in Damascus.”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Al-Qabas}, “Al-usatadhā yata’dalun ma‘ mu‘awiyya,” 10 April 1932, 3.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Al-Qabas}, “Usatadh al-jami‘a fī dimashaq,” 8 April 1932, 2.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Al-Qabas}, “Al-usatadhā yata’dalun ma‘ mu‘awiyya,” 10 April 1932, 3.
\textsuperscript{29} Post-match tea parties were quite common at this time. My suspicion is that these underscore the middle- and upper-class milieu of the participants in these matches. Fancy tea parties were not generally the realm of the popular classes. In vastly different contexts, post-match festivities have sometimes revealed class cleavages. In an examination of the class dimensions of rugby in late nineteenth century England, James W. Martens described one such event in which the genteel Middlesex rugby club hosted the more working-class Durham XV side. After the match, the Middlesex men paraded about in their “frock coats” while the Durham XV men “treated their hosts to a singalong that so offended their hosts that further matches were cancelled and the fixture was not taken up again until after the First World War.” James Martens, “Rugby, Class, Amateurism and Manliness: the Case of Rugby in Northern England, 1871-1895,” in \textit{Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity}, eds. John Nauright and Timothy J.L. Chandler (London: Frank Cass, 1996), 35.
After another run-in with a certain persona non grata referee in Beirut (whom Al-Qabas referred to as “the famous champion of partisanship”), Mu‘awiyya faced the famed Egyptian club Tarsana, in a match which again demonstrated the status of Egypt as an internationally recognized standard of modernity and progress. Prior to the match, Al-Qabas actively promoted the contest, calling it “the first of its kind in Damascus.” Mu‘awiyya’s opponent was quite formidable, having journeyed to Hungary and Turkey for international matches. Its roster also boasted a degree of stability, including a defense which had not changed for years, a remarkable situation given that the players of “most clubs change overnight.” The clubs of Palestine felt the impact of this stability when Tarsana played them on the way to Damascus, defeating every opponent. Al-Qabas concluded on a pessimistic note: “the team who won with ease over all the teams of Palestine is not a team which any team in Damascus or Beirut hopes to win over or tie with.”

Although Mu‘awiyya ultimately secured neither a victory nor a tie, the club performed well, attracting the esteem of their opponents and the interest of important spectators. As in the case of the Beiruti professors, the article commented on the opposing team’s impressions of the stadium. The Egyptian players reportedly remarked in Egyptian colloquial: “This stadium is good…not the stadiums of Palestine. (da mala‘b kwayis…mish malā‘ab Filasṭīn).” In the beautiful stadium, the audience included several political dignitaries, among them the President of Syria, King Fu‘ad of Egypt, various

Syrian representatives and high ministers, and the Egyptian Consul.\textsuperscript{32} In addition to politicians, the event was marked by the press presence: numerous Egyptian and Syrian reporters “flapped about” while photographers snapped picture after picture. A film crew, too, recorded the game, capturing footage of the Egyptian team’s “beautiful bodies and exceptional playing” and the Damascene side’s “beautiful athletic bodies.”

Despite Mu‘awiyya’s eventual loss by a score of 3 goals to 2, the press coverage hailed the result as a “great triumph” for Mu'awiyya and Damascus more generally, an assertion founded on a now familiar comparative framework utilized to measure progress. Indeed, the writers intoned, the loss by a margin of one goal was not a result the Palestinian clubs of Tel Aviv, Haifa, Yaffa, and Jerusalem could even “dream” of. The “great triumph,” moreover, “raised the head of Damascus in front of Egypt and its equals, and proved the liveliness of Mu’awiyya and its progress in everything.”\textsuperscript{33} Moreover, according to the newspaper account, the club’s successful repositioning of Damascus with respect to other locales dominated many discussions: “the conversation of people was and still is focused on this…result.” The coverage of the game revealed the continued inclination to use sports contests as registers of progress (though not necessarily national), to view Egypt in particular as an exemplar of modernity, and to

\textsuperscript{32} Of course, the attendance of notables did not necessarily mean that the attendees viewed the game in political terms. Laura Fair shows that although the Sultan of Zanzibar and the British resident often attended matches of the Zanzibar Cup in the mid-1920s and the government “invested considerable time and money in choreographing” the spectacle, “the crowd was far more interested in the ‘fast clever footwork’ of the players than the parade of leading businessmen into the grandstand.” Fair, \textit{Pastimes and Politics}, 243.

\textsuperscript{33} The reaction of the press to the loss as a triumph might have even had an effect on international perception of the result of the match. In November of 1932, Mu'awiyya undertook a tour of Palestine. In a summary of international press attention to the club, \textit{Al-Qabas} noted that a British newspaper in anticipation of the trip had stated that Mu'awiyya had tied with Tarasana. In an editor’s note, \textit{Al-Qabas} corrected the error, noting that Mu'awiyya actually lost 3-2. \textit{Al-Qabas}, “Rihlat mu'awiyya ila filastin,” 2 November 1932, 2.
bring all of these discussions together in a public sphere of press coverage and spectator interest.

Other writers more explicitly linked notions of physical fitness and civilizational progress, positioning derisory physical fitness as an explanatory factor for Syrian political impotence. In an editorial published on July 11, 1932, Muhammad Halawa expounded on this topic. Halawa identified consensus on the importance of “bodily athletics” as one of the defining characteristics of the “modern city in the twentieth century.” In addition to making this general claim about athletics as a prerequisite of modernity in general, Halawa also mentioned specific instances where attention to athletics brought about civilizational advancement, calling physical training one of “the biggest factors in the progress of the great kingdoms like France and England and Japan and Turkey and Italy and Germany and others.” Although Halawa cited examples of non-European models of progress, his use of a “western man” to illustrate his point underscored the particular sense of difference perceived between the nation and the West as well as the understanding of physical fitness as connected to national defense. “If I directed my attention to a Westerner,” Halawa wrote, “imagine him strong of forearms and strong of frame, he is able to vanquish five or six of our current youth.” Halawa evidently felt differently than Yazbak, the Lebanese newspaper editor who raved about the athletic

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35 While this is the first example of connecting athletic vigor with civilizational advancement that I was able to locate in *Al-Qabas*, Jacob finds a case as early as 1899 in the Egyptian newspaper *al-Muqtataf*. The article attributed the fall of Greece and Rome to their lack of concern for athletics. Jacob, “Working out Egypt,” 139.
36 The gender aspect of Zionism similarly posited that Jews were physically deficient in comparison with Western men. In response to this condition, leaders of the movement such as Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau promoted the idea of the muscle Jew as an antithesis to all stereotypes of the diseased, effeminate resident of the ghetto: “the New Jew’s characteristics were to mimic those of the gentiles: tall, close to nature and physically productive.” Tamar Mayer, “From Zero to Hero: Masculinity in Jewish Nationalism,” in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer (London: Routledge, 2000) 287.
bearing of the Damascus youth. In contrast, Halawa described the typical Syrian youth as “afflicted with disease and infection” such that “he becomes weak and is unable to undertake his personal duties let alone the duties of the nation (waṭan).”

If Yazbak and Halawa disagreed about the current state of the Damascus youth, they nevertheless concurred with respect to the importance of physical training for the youth.

Halawa did not direct this message to all Syrians, but rather aimed his salvos at a particular class of citizens who had deviated from the national essence. Halawa asked the reader, “So why do you not practice athletics oh you Syrian when you know that it is the basis of your progress and your prosperity?” In this passage, Halawa reaffirmed his belief in athletics as a means of achieving material advancement. Continuing with the theme of defining athletics as an authentically national yet unfortunately lost practice, Halawa asked the reader: “Do you not remember that your nation (ummatak) is the only nation which devoted its attention to sports in the Middle Ages?”

In his next apostrophe, Halawa more clearly revealed to whom he spoke: “you, Arab, if you were a minister or lawyer or trader or farmer, it does not disfigure you to train your body daily.” Halawa exhorted the holders of middle and upper-class positions that required little physical exertion to undertake some form of exercise to strengthen their bodies and, consequently, their nation. For Halawa, the peasant needed little help in terms of

37 Halawa’s characterization of Syrians as diseased was based in experience. As Thompson notes, “Epidemics remained so widespread through the early 1920s that the French were accused of doctoring health statistics submitted to the League of Nations. Newspapers regularly complained of the need for more services, demanding hygiene as a public right.” Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 77-78.

38 As Timothy Mitchell notes, “One of the odd things about the arrival of the era of the modern nation-state was that for a state to prove that it was modern, it helped if it could also prove that it was ancient.” Mitchell, Rule of Experts, 179.
physical fitness; in order for Syria to reclaim its “wiped out glory,” middle- and upper-
class men needed to reform their bodies through physical exertion.\(^3\!^9\)

In order to achieve this goal, Halawa called for increased government support of
athletics. The countries that Halawa claimed had achieved physical and national glory
were willing to “set aside a portion of money in the budget of its government to support
the pursuit of athletics to strengthen the bodies of its sons and to culture their minds.”\(^4\!^0\)

While again underscoring the focus of the entire discourse on men, Halawa also
advocated for the strengthening of bodies to become a state project.\(^4\!^1\)

He further hoped that the “young, free government” of Syria might “specify a monetary amount” for
supporting the athletic movement. If such funding could be secured, the future of
Damascus was bright in Halawa’s eyes. He closed by citing Mu‘awiyya’s courageous
stand in front of Egypt’s Tarsana club as a reason for hope. While matches such as this
one functioned as part of an athletic sphere of spectacles where male bodies were
displayed to the public, the press coverage of these matches generally conceived of them

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\(^3\!^9\) The notion of reclaiming a lost glory figured prominently in Egypt during the 1920s, too. Lopez writes
that “\textit{Al-Ahram}’s sportswriters characterized Egypt’s participation in international football competition as
the fulfillment of the country’s supposedly ancient football legacy.” Lopez, “Football as National
Allegory,” 290.

\(^4\!^0\) The dual emphasis on the need for training the body and the mind resonates with Alter’s work on
wrestling in India. According to the “logic of Cartesian dualism” that characterizes much of “Western
thought,” “the body is but an instrumental object of secondary significance” to the importance of the mind.
In contrast, Alter suggests that “in Hindu philosophy the mind and the body are intrinsically linked to one
another. There is no sense of simple duality.” Although the repeated connection between morality and
activity in the Syrian context seems to imply a resemblance with Alter’s description of the Indian
understanding of physical activity, I am not so sure that a strict Cartesian duality characterizes all of
Western physical activity. Joseph Alter, \textit{The Wrestler’s Body: Identity and Ideology in North India}

\(^4\!^1\) This call for reforms aimed at athletic improvement hints at perhaps one of the most alluring aspects of
physical activity. Whereas scientists had for decades attributed European power over other parts of the
world to biological reasons, the discourse of physical activity in Syria demonstrated that Syrians rejected
this logic. Falling behind Europe or other parts of the world was not due to innate racial difference but
rather particularly different administrative structures. Tamir Sorek identifies a similar tendency in
Palestine in the 1920s: “sports is considered as both an explanation for European physical superiority and a
cure for Arab inferiority.” Tamir Sorek, \textit{Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: the Integrative Enclave}
as registers of local progress rather than national progress. Yet Halawa’s comment showed that explicit links between athletic and national progress were being made.

As independence negotiations stalled and economic conditions worsened, numerous radical youth groups forced the National Bloc to modify its approach of “honorable cooperation.”

One of these was the League of National Action. Established in August of 1933, the group threatened the National Bloc with a young, middle-class membership and a pan-Arab political agenda. While they represented enough of a challenge to rouse the attention of the National Bloc, their disdain for older methods of political organizing that occurred in the popular quarters rather than new institutions limited their ability to harness power effectively. Nevertheless, the presence of the League of National Action convinced Jamil Mardam Bey, one of the most prominent leaders of the National Bloc, that his party’s youth organizing needed “a facelift.”

Part of this effort was strategically adopting a “confrontational style” with the French authorities in order to quell growing discontent with the National Bloc’s lacking political accomplishments. Over the course of 1934 and 1935, the National Bloc demonstrated this shift by participating in several nationalist causes célèbre, opposing imported Zionist goods, Assyrian migration, the French tobacco monopoly, and, most spectacularly, the European-owned and operated Damascus Tramway and Electricity Company. In the context of this extensive re-positioning by the predominant nationalist political organization, the bourgeois male body became increasingly tied to the nation.

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43 Ibid., 434.
44 Ibid., 444.
By the middle of the decade, local writers increasingly made these types of claims, linking individual strength with national strength. On April 25; 1935, the headline of a column in the sports section of *Al-Qabas* encouraged the Arab youth, “Make your motto always: let us be strong!” The author made this request in light of the exigencies of the time period, stating that “the present age is the age of strength and whoever seeks permanence and victory in life – as an individual or as a nation (*fardiyan kān aw ummatan*) – so it is upon him to be strong.” Strength was a bodily attribute. But it also entailed a number of moral virtues. By participating in the “scouting and athletic life,” the youth learned “asceticism and roughness and endurance.” Moreover, they became accustomed to “complete order (*niẓām tām*).” This aspect of physical activity had a clear value as a constitutive force in society, unifying participants’ “feelings and goals and pains and beliefs together in life that the individuals melt in the crucible of society (*yadhūb al-afrād fi-būtaqat al-mujtam'a*).” For this author, the key to forming a unified body politic was the development of each individual body.

Some manifestations of unity appeared in May 1935, when schools across Syria and Lebanon held sporting festivals which generated much interest, particularly among students but also among the general public. One of these events was a football championship for Damascus secondary schools organized by the secretary of the Bardi athletic club, the writer Mr. Khayr al-Din al-Bakri. Al-Bakri established the event with the goal of “activating the athletic spirit among the students of the institutes of Damascus.” According to the newspaper report, the event clearly generated interest. Students from the schools “came in crowds to participate in the games and watch the

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festivals and they followed its news and its problems also.” Nor was spectatorship limited to students. The news report described that for the “final battle” of the tournament, a match between Tajhiz and Laique, “the stadium was jammed with spectators from all of the classes (mutafarajīn min jamī‘a al-ṭabaqāt).”

Athletics, even at the secondary school level, had evidently become public spectacles that diverse crowds of spectators attended.

The final match provided a setting in which authorities directly linked physical fitness of the individual with the needs of the nation in front of this mixed crowd. The game started with enthusiasm at 5:00 in the evening. The Tajhiz side dominated from the beginning, recording their first goal ten minutes into the game and recording two more goals early in the second half to take a 3-0 lead. Late in the second half, Tajhiz recorded a fourth goal, which “was the most beautiful of the goals.” Mr. Ramzi al-Bir Qadar “recorded it and the goalkeeper of Laique did not know from where the strike came or how to respond to it.” The game concluded “with a big spouting of joy for the Tajhiz team which deserved the title of champion of the clubs.” Following the game, “the president of the club called to the winning team and Mrs. Ḍa‘fīfa Sa‘b presented to it the championship trophy.”

The spectators maintained their enthusiasm and the “cheering of the crowd and the youth was sharp.” Mrs. Sa‘b addressed them: “Indeed I do not present the trophy for the winning team but rather I present champions for the nation

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48 It is unclear whether the schools charged spectators for admission. If so, the mingling of classes might have been limited. As Riess notes in his examination of athletics as part of the urban context, “Different social classes intermingled as little as possible in their sporting pleasures. Until the 1920s, they often would not, or could not, attend the same spectator sports; if they did, they would sit in separate sections, determined by the price of tickets.” Steven Riess, *City Games: the Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 5.

49 Sa‘b edited the Beirut-based women’s magazine *al-Khidr* between 1923 and 1927. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 121.
(waṭan) since it needs strong resolution (al-‘azaim al-qawiyya) and muscular forearms (sawa’id mafīlūla) and mighty spirits (al-nafūs al-jabbāra).” Instead of simply crowning the victors, Mrs. Sa’b explicitly characterized them as the property of the nation. Moreover, she directly connected national needs with the physical attributes of the individual players. In this respect, her diction echoed Halawa. While Halawa viewed the Western man’s robust “forearms” as emblematic of his physical superiority over Syrian men, Mrs. Sa’b mentioned the “muscular forearms” of the Syrian youth as part of the national bodybuilding project. The final noteworthy aspect of this event was the fact of the audience: Sa’b articulated the message of a national imperative for strong and resolute bodies to a crowd composed of different social strata. While it is unclear how individuals in the crowd understood the message, Sa’b’s words demonstrate that the discourse of healthy bodies for a healthy nation was not simply buried in the memoranda of elites; rather, it was circulated and presented as part of athletic ceremonies to a wider audience. All of these emphases reflected a shift from treatments of athletic contests earlier in the decade, when commentators connected sporting success with the progress of the city of Damascus rather than the nation of Syria. The newspaper report concluded by describing the crowd’s perceptions of the match as it dispersed: “all of them were amazed at the superiority of the Tajhiz” and its triumph in “a part of athletic and scientific and cultural life.” The reporter believed the crowd understood the sporting event as reflective of larger dynamics in society at the time. The story concluded in a laudatory tone redolent of optimism for the future: “well done young athletes of tomorrow, well done!”

Despite the acclaim and attention generated by the tournament, the summer of 1935 was not the most active time for sporting in Damascus, prompting calls for
government promotion of athletics and its corollary, moral virtue. A June 17 article noted that “the Damascene audience became accustomed in the previous years to witnessing in each athletic season athletic contests and parties” amongst the clubs of Damascus on the one hand and between Damascene clubs and international clubs on the other hand. Past seasons fueled hopes for “athletic revival in the Syrian nation (al-qaṭar al-sūrī).” Yet in 1935, the article claimed, “athletic activity has been listless.” If not for the secondary school football tournament in May and a few matches organized by Bardi during the summer, the article claimed there would be “neither a trace nor a memory” of the current athletic season. As a point of contrast, the author mentioned Beirut, where week-long championships were the norm rather than the exception. While the article assigned a degree of blame to the Damascene clubs, it apportioned “the biggest share of responsibility” for the collective languor to “local government for its ignorance of its duty in encouraging sports and helping its clubs.” The author based the call for government promotion of physical culture on an idea that bodily training created moral virtue: strengthening the “athletic spirit” fell decidedly within the government’s interest since it helped “preserve morals and culture youth and reform them.” Although the author feared that the government’s “negligence” might cause the “good movement” to fall into a “heap,” the article closed with an assertion of hope that “the awakened Syrian youth” would not deviate from the “path to renewal and strength and ordering, whatever the burdens.” Like Halawa, the author of this article called for government involvement in athletics. Also like Halawa, the author called for this government intervention on a national level, in contrast to the numerous summaries of football matches that saw

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50 Al-Qabas, “‘Ala man taqa’ tabi’at hatha al futur?’” 17 June 1935, 9.
athletics as a measure of city rather than national progress. What differentiated this piece from Halawa’s, however, was the explicit link between moral virtue and physical activity, a logic which informed the promotion of scouting and sports alike.\textsuperscript{51}

As the activity of the season picked up again, press reports continued to associate athletic activity with certain virtues and, moreover, the politics of the nation. On Wednesday, August 7, 1935, the football teams of the Bardi and Qasiyun clubs met on the grounds of Martyrs Square in the heart of Damascus for an “exciting” match.\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Al-Qabas}’s special sports correspondent emphasized the qualities that the game displayed. The players “demonstrated what they had learned of order in playing and cooperation for securing victory.” In addition to the group concept of teamwork, the match also displayed virtues on an individual level. The correspondent noted that the “effort” exerted in the game “indicated to us (the viewers) the strength of the players and the health of their bodies.” In the first half, Bardi attacked with “patience” until finally the club recorded a goal to the great delight of the crowd. Bardi continued to have success in the second half, taking a 2-0 lead with a goal scored on account of the “negligence of the defense of its opponent.” Qasiyun responded, however. The deficit “raised the blood” of the club in the “chests of its young athletes” and “they organized their attack with enthusiasm and courage until” they recorded a goal amidst “the amazement of the onlookers and their cheers.” The 2-1 score did not hold. As the correspondent wrote, “Fate willed that not one of the teams would win over the other and Mamduh Ayubi

\textsuperscript{51} Cyrus Schayegh also finds link between athletics and virtue in early twentieth-century Iran, where modernist thinkers argued that “sports were an excellent preventive measure and cure for diseased willpower.” Cyrus Schayegh, \textit{Who is Knowledgeable is Strong: Science, Class, and the Formation of Modern Iranian Society, 1900-1950} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), 180.

\textsuperscript{52} \textit{Al-Qabas}, “Bardi wa qasiyun yata'dalan fi-l-mubara,” 11 August 1935, 9.
recorded the second and final goal for Qasiyun two minutes before the end of the game.” Thus, the match ended in a draw. According to the correspondent, however, the result was appropriate and the crowd’s response underscored this fact: “indeed the crowd cheered for this tie since it would hurt them (the crowd) if one of the teams left defeated when they were both sons of one country (wa huma ibna’ balad wahid).” Whether the crowd believed this or not is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, the discursive framing revealed something of a shift, perhaps due to the National Bloc’s increasing need to project an image of a unified nation as part of its simultaneous negotiation with the French and subaltern political challengers. Whereas in the early 1930s, newspaper stories rarely conceived of athletic contests as having significance beyond the city level, this story underscored the wider semiotic significance athletics were assuming. The author’s concluding comment revealed a desire to assert the unity of the country’s symbolic actors – its athletes – on the national stage – the playing field – all in front of a cheering crowd.

If some athletic contests might have confirmed national unity on a metaphorical level, other sporting events underscored the nation’s divisions on an actual level. An August story with an at-first-glance redundant headline of “Boxing match ends in hitting and punching” revealed some of the boundary lines negotiated within national borders. Several weeks after the match between Qasiyun and Bardi, Al-Najma al-Suriyya club held a boxing competition. An “overflowing crowd attended” the event, including a large contingent of Armenians on account of the Armenian “nationality (jinsiyya)” of two

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53 Martin describes the same tension in Italian football in the 1920s: “there was considerable concern when, rather than act as bonding agents, teams became potentially destructive forces that might attack and atomize the national community.” Simon Martin, Football and Fascism: the National Game under Mussolini (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 74.

of the boxers, Badrus and Kalus Tarzian. After forfeits in two of the first three matches, the competition heated up in the fourth, a contest between Mustafa Daghastani and Badrus, the Armenian. With the Syrian “half-heavy weight” title on the line, Daghastani overcame Badrus by a point in a judge’s decision. As the next fight between Mustafa al-Arna’ut and the other Armenian pugilist, Kalus Tarzian, got underway, “anger was indeed evident from the Armenians over the occurrence of the defeat of their champion in the previous round and they began to be boisterous.” Al-Arna’ut took control of the match. As his punches for his Armenian opponent “intensified, the audience encouraged him (al-Arna’ut) and clapped for him.” With the sting of a dubious defeat in the prior round, the impending defeat of their champion in the current round, and the (Syrian) crowd’s enthusiasm for this result, emotions boiled over. One of the Armenian spectators and his comrades attacked one of the (Syrian) fans “so there was a violent fight that a big audience participated in.” As the brawl ensued, spectators wielded chairs as weapons. It was eventually deemed “impossible to complete the boxing and the audience unfortunately withdrew.”

The presence of Armenians in Syria had proven volatile in the national political arena as well. By the early 1930s, a community of around 200,000 had settled in Syria, especially in Aleppo, many of them refugees of the Turkish genocide. French authorities patronized the group, like it did with many minority groups, as a “client

55 The article did not present the match as representative of broader ideas about national progress or hierarchies of nations. In contrast, the Egyptian press in the late 1920s often used sports results with African nations to support “their own hierarchical racial discourse that placed Egyptians ahead of other Africans in particular, and other British and French colonial subjects more generally.” Lopez, “Football as National Allegory,” 298.

56 Watenpaugh, Being Modern in the Middle East, 281.
community of the state” and this patronage drew the enmity of many nationalists.\textsuperscript{57} Armenian participation in the French army during the Great Syrian Revolt in general and the atrocities committed by Armenian irregular troops in a January 1926 assault on the Maydan quarter of Damascus in particular caused tension.\textsuperscript{58} Economics, too, fueled the division. Armenians willing to work for lower wages pushed working-class Syrians and artisans out of jobs. At the other end of the class spectrum, economic elites viewed the propagation of communism by some Armenians as a threat to their interests. Also significant was the essentialist logic of self-determination espoused by the League of Nations and evidenced by the massive population transfers of the time period, beginning with Turkey and Greece in the wake of World War I. As rumors of a French-backed Armenian state in Syria circulated, newspaper headlines appeared which demonstrated the connection between self-determination and the anxieties that permeated relations with the Armenian community. Writers wondered if Syria had become the “country for all of the nations (\textit{umam}).”\textsuperscript{59} More dramatically, some writers likened the Armenians in Syria to another non-native group threatening Arab self-determination, none other than the Zionists in Palestine.\textsuperscript{60} If every discrete national group deserved its own nation, the presence of Armenians in Syria severely threatened this unity.

Yet the coverage of the riot at the boxing match mentioned none of these dynamics, instead emphasizing the role of sportsmanship, or lack thereof, in spurring the event. The reporter wrote: “And if we blame anyone we blame some of the fans in this

\textsuperscript{57} Khoury, \textit{Syria and the French Mandate}, 206.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 191.
\textsuperscript{59} \textit{Al-Qabas}, “Iskan al-arman fi suriyya: hal al-bilad li jami’yyat al-umam?” 22 March 1929.
\textsuperscript{60} Najib Rayyes, “Al-watan al-mustabah?! Suriyya bayn al-watan al-sahyuni wa al-watan al-armani,” \textit{Al-Qabas}, 30 October 1930.
party who only comprehend athletics and games in saying ‘Who is the winner?’ and
‘How many punches?’” Adopting a didactic tone, the reporter made a call to the civilized
principle of spectator sports: “games are a means to encourage the victor and the defeated
equally.” The author noted that having a victor is “inevitable” but this is no reason for
“enthusiasm and anger.” Concluding, the author stated, “I am sorry for this enthusiasm
which transformed the boxing party into a party of hitting and punching and injuring,”
which “revealed the latent depths of individuals (kawamin al-nafūs).” The final
comment was rather cryptic: were “the latent depths of individuals” their national
identities or their uncivilized impulses? In either case, the author presented proper
sportsmanship as a means of elevating individuals above these base instincts, suggesting
an important element of moral uplift as part of the athletic project. In both this instance
and Mu‘awiyya’s encounter with the biased referee Pierre Gemayel, writers articulated
visions of propriety based on a degree of reticence, lauding Mu‘awiyya’s initial hesitation
to complain about Gemayel’s poor officiating and criticizing the enthusiasm exuded by
some of the spectators at the boxing match. Although not explicit, both of these opinions
reflected an elite view of sport in which norms of conduct protected society from
outbreaks of disorder caused by local or ethnic loyalties. The next chapter will continue
to probe the connections between physical activity and class by examining the scouting
movement in Syria.

61 Here, the author implicitly endorsed sportsmanship as a means of overcoming intra-national division.
Notions of sporting propriety were also seen as means of overcoming class. Howell notes this dynamic in
Canadian sport in the early twentieth-century: “reformers hoped that a ‘democratic’ field of play, open to
those who would play by gentleman’s rules, would dissolve the class antagonisms that accompanied
capitalist transformation, and help win the support of working people to the new order.” Howell, Blood,
Sweat, and Cheers, 52.
CHAPTER TWO
WANDERING THE NATION AND NATIONALIZING CLASS IN THE SYRIAN
SCOUTING MOVEMENT

Emerging at the intersection of an international youth movement and local conditions, the Syrian scouting movement claimed to cultivate moral virtues and national ideals among the youth through its practices of expeditions and parades. Scouting organizers primarily targeted educated, urban youth for these endeavors, underscoring predominantly middle- and upper-class participation in this form of physical activity. At the same time as athletic contests became venues where the individual body became associated with national needs, scouting troops claimed to imbue young bourgeois men with the virtues necessary for the nation. Just like the football field and the boxing ring, the scouting camp functioned as a site for asserting the primacy of the bourgeois man in the process of making the nation.

The institution of scouting originated in Britain but quickly radiated to other parts of the world. Robert Baden-Powell, a retired British military officer, established the organization in Britain in 1908 with the overarching goal of saving the youth from the effeminizing influences of domestic city-life and teaching them how “to be real men.”¹ MacDonald attributes a confluence of factors to its founding, including “popular imperialism, social Darwinism, the crisis of masculinity and the search for ‘national efficiency,’ social concerns about poverty and slum conditions, new theories of education, and the value of fresh air.”² Within its first year of existence, membership

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¹ Robert MacDonald, Sons of the Empire: the Frontier and Boy Scout Movement (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 3.
² Ibid., 13.
exceeded 100,000 boys. The organization proliferated internationally as well, with the number of officially recognized troops counting two million in fifty-seven nations by 1931. Countless other organizations surfaced, too, inspired by, if not officially affiliated with Baden-Powell’s international organization.

The movement spread to the Levant, where it gradually became politicized. The scouting movement had existed in the region since at least 1912, when a pair of Indian brothers established a division of what they called Ottoman Scouts at their school in Beirut. Responding to similar social conditions as Baden-Powell and articulating a very similar project to remedy these problems, various sectarian groups founded scouting troops for their respective communities throughout the 1920s. By the late 1920s, scouting had become an important arena for politics. The leaders of the prominent Ghuta Troop resolutely refused to associate with the National Bloc and, in response, Fakhri al-Barudi, a prominent Bloc member with a knack for youth organizing, oversaw the formation of a troop to be affiliated with the National Bloc, known as the Umayyad Troop. Both organizations received international recognition. Although the organizations attached themselves to competing political ideologies, they espoused remarkably similar notions about the nature of the nation and the connection of the youth to it in their responses to mandate authorities’ efforts to restrict the scouting movement.

In July of 1934, the French high commissioner issued an order which greatly limited the activities of athletic organizations in general and scouting troops in particular.

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4 Ibid.
6 Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 407.
7 Ibid.
On 4 July, the French authorities posted copies of the law on the doors of the mandate offices in Damascus, Beirut, Latakia, and Suwayda. The order made clear that although the mandate authorities supported “the practice of athletic games…in the fresh air” they feared the political engagement of these organized bands of young men. With these apprehensions in mind, the authorities attempted to circumscribe the scope of membership in these groups. The order banned youth over the age of twenty from membership in organized athletic groups. Furthermore, the order stipulated that members of these organized groups must be of good behavior, which generally meant that they must not have arrest records. To ensure compliance with these directives, the authorities mandated that up-to-date membership records that would be shared with the French authorities every six months.

In addition to regulating the group membership of these organizations, the French authorities attempted to limit the groups’ activities. The attention-grabbing parades that scouting groups held within cities as well as the multi-week excursions they undertook throughout the country now required permission from French authorities. So too did simple meetings. Individual violations of the government dictates could result in a fine of between one Syrian Lira and twenty Syrian lira as well as imprisonment between one and fifteen days. Organizational violations of these measures could result in the immediate dissolution of the organization. Existing organizations were required to submit an application for permission to operate within a month of the order’s issuance. The authorities would then decide on the merits of the requests within three months. If

organizations did not receive a reply from the High Commissioner, they were to consider their organization dissolved.

In response to the French efforts to constrict and monitor the members of athletic groups, leaders of the scouting groups emphasized the apolitical nature of their activities and called upon international structures to legitimize their claims. Upon propagation of the order, the general leader of the Muslim Scouts, Muhi al-Din al-Nasuli sought clarification from the authorities upon whether the authorities included the scouting movement in their understanding of the term “athletic organizations.” Seeking a personal meeting with the high commissioner, al-Nasuli instead met with the High Commissioner’s Chief of Staff, who clarified that the mandate authorities indeed included the scouting movement in their definition of athletic movements. Al-Nasuli countered these claims by describing the scouting movement’s goals. He noted that scouting was removed from “politics and its conditions,” stressing the “moral and humanitarian” imperatives of scouting. According to al-Nasuli, scouting removed youth from corrupt environments. Using a religious tone, he noted that the principles of scouting could “convert” youth. Moreover, al-Nasuli added, the Muslim scouts were part of an international movement, “recognized by all of the nations (umam).” If al-Nasuli’s first line of argument revealed claims about the transformative power of scouting, the latter revealed the increasing importance of international recognition as a guarantor of legitimacy in a world composed more and more of nation-states, even if Syria was not a

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9 Al-Qabas, “Qanun tanzim al-jami‘yat al-riyadiyya,” 16 July 1934, 5. As the name of the conglomeration of troops suggests, the group sought a syncretic blend between Islamic principles and Baden-Powell’s scouting directives. Dueck shows how, for example, the Boy Scout motto of “Be prepared” was translated as a variant of the Qur’anic verse “And prepare your strength against them as best you can (8:60).” Dueck, “A Muslim Jamboree,” 492.
The leaders of the scouting movement expressed a willingness to mobilize their international network of support and recognition in order to back their claims. After an unproductive meeting between scouting leaders and the French Director of General Security in which the official reiterated the stipulations of the High Commission’s order, the scouting leadership contemplated sending Muhi al-Din al-Nasuli to London to raise the issue with the President and founder of the International Scouts Robert Baden Powell. In response to the government crack-down on scouting activities, *Al-Qabas* ran a series of articles in which it interviewed leaders of the various scouting troops, speaking with them about the origins and activities of their organizations as well as the influence of the most recent French order on their organizations.

The words of Midhat al-Bitar, the leader of the Maysalun troop, underscored the scouts’ transnational roots and their nation-making function. By al-Bitar’s account, the inspiration for the founding of the Maysalun troop was a trip by the Iraqi scouts to Damascus and greater Syria. At the time, al-Bitar described Damascus as in a “complete listlessness” (*futūr tām*) in terms of scouting, so much so that there was not any organization to receive and take care of the Iraqi “guest.” As a result of the absence, al-Bitar decided to revive a movement that had not seen popularity since 1928. With the help of several other youth, al-Bitar succeeded in forming the Maysalun troop in May of 1932. The organization subsequently participated in the annual commemoration of its

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10 In British East and South Africa, scouting provided a vehicle for the colonized to contest colonialism, too. Timothy Parsons writes that while British colonial authorities promoted scouting as a means of social control, Africans subverted these disciplinary measures and “embraced the movement to claim the rights of full citizenship in colonial society.” Timothy Parsons, *Race, Resistance, and the Boy Scout Movement in British Colonial Africa* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), 6.


namesake, the 1920 battle of Maysalun. In addition to facilitating national rituals of collective memory, the Maysalun troop participated in many expeditions across the expanse of Lebanon and Syria. Al-Bitar listed Damascus, Baalbek, Hums, Tarablus, Jabal ‘Amil, the Hawran, Jabal Druze, and Jabal Lubnan as places visited by the troop. He concluded, “It is possible for me to say that the individuals of the Maysalun troop got to know all of the parts of Syria except Deir al-Zor and Tadmir.” Like al-Nasuli, al-Bitar claimed that the scouting movement was fundamentally apolitical. Of course, they employed this strategy in order to avoid French suppression of their organizations; creating the nation through rituals is a deeply political process. But recognition of this fact would not only displease the French; it would also break the silence that confirmed the natural-ness of the nation.

The scouts’ expeditions throughout the local environs provided an interesting case of nation-making sans imagination. Often, studies of nationalism emphasize its imaginative aspects, following Benedict Anderson’s seminal work. Yet Anderson also notes the productive impact of journeys – like those the scouts undertook – in the construction of a national consciousness. Anderson makes this argument in Creole America, where he contends that government functionaries were almost without exception barred from the administration in the metropole. As they bounced from position to position in the territories of Chile or Mexico, for example, they not only experienced the geography of their respective administrative unit; they also encountered other people in their same position, essentially banished to the Americas, barred from
Europe. As a result, they somewhat inadvertently developed ideas about the unity of their geographic area. Like these government functionaries, Syrian boy scouts undertook travels that followed circuits bounded by administrative authorities, often encountering troops from other parts of Syria along the way. Yet the boy scouts’ movements were part of an explicit effort to familiarize young men with their environs. While Anderson suggests that government functionaries of Creole America developed nationalism almost by mistake, the scout leaders of the Syrian youth groups made this idea of developing national consciousness one of their primary goals. In performing these tasks, the scout leaders rendered imagination less necessary for the young men in their troops: the scouts were not so much imagining their communities as experiencing them.

Al-Bitar’s response to the new French regulations underscored the class nature of this nation-making project. Leaving little question about the impact of the law on the movement, al-Bitar asserted that the order would “without a doubt cripple” the scouting organizations. By restricting the ability of the scouting troops to undertake expeditions, al-Bitar believed that the French order would destroy the scouting troops’ most effective means for attracting new membership. Al-Bitar’s discussion of how to attract new members revealed much about whom his particular scouting organization wished to include. Al-Bitar declared that in general the movement needed “advertising” so that the “sophisticated youth (shabāb muḥḥaddhab)” might “accept” the movement. He added that the newly imposed limitations on group activities would limit the groups’ abilities to include “educated groups” and “awakened youth.” While al-Bitar certainly desired a bourgeois membership for his organization, he did not view the scouts as an organization

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that simply gathered fully-developed youth. He believed that the organization edified the individual scout as well, citing “culturing the youth and educating them morally” as key components of the scouting project.

In addition to employing a fundamentally class-oriented project of selective membership and moral uplift in articulating the goals of scouting, al-Bitar also criticized the new restrictions on athletic organizations in reference to European scouting. Noting the age limit imposed by the French law, al-Bitar fumed that “scouting in the advanced European countries included men who are above fifty.” Like al-Nasuli, al-Bitar engaged the international angle in his argument against the scouting law, inscribing the notion of a hierarchy of progress in the process. He appealed to the French mandate authorities – their rule made possible by a hierarchical arrangement of power enshrining European superiority – by demonstrating that their own orders banned Syrians and Lebanese from the same policies practiced in advanced European countries.

Like Midhat al-Batar, ‘Ali ‘Abd al-Karim al-Dandashi founded scouting groups that arose from regional influences to engage in nationalist practices. Established in 1928, the Ghuta emerged under the leadership of al-Dandashi after, according to his words, the visits of Beirut scouting troops to Damascus engendered among the local youth a “fascination” with and “longing” for similar scouting organizations.\(^\text{14}\) Although the troop disappeared in what he called the “listlessness” of 1932, the legacy of Ghuta endured. Al-Dandashi utilized many of the skills he had learned from these earlier experiences to form the Tariq bin Ziyad troop in 1934. After considerable work, the troop introduced itself to the world as part of the scouting camp that took place in Beirut

\(^{14}\) *Al-Qabas*, “Kayfa ta’assasset najadat tariq bin ziyad?” 16 August 1934, 1, 6.
during Eid al-Fitr of 1934. With a smaller and more advanced membership than other organizations, al-Dandashi christened the members of this troop not as scouts (kashshāf) but rather as najāda, or seekers. The seekers differentiated themselves from the normal scouts in their attire of a wool shirt and an accessory of a stick held in hand. Al-Dandashi stressed that these clothes were all authentically “national Damascene clothes (al-aqmasha al-waṭaniyya al-dimashqiyya).” Although his seekers had not engaged in the long expeditions of some of the other troops, they still found time to participate in a kind of nationalist pilgrimage: al-Dandashi remarked that Tariq bin Ziyad was the one troop that had visited the National Cement Factory, a much ballyhooed economic scheme overseen by nationalist elites, among them Muʿawiyya Club President Khalid al-ʿAzm.

Al-Dandashi conceived of scouting as a corporeal and intellectual reform program that instilled a sense of nation and a sense of class. Cringing at the French suggestion that scouting constituted merely an athletic movement, al-Dandashi declared that it was nothing less than “an educational reform movement (ḥaraka tahdhibiya islahiya) aimed at emitting the spirit of peace and fraternity and culturing the youth in terms of spirit, literature, and athletics.” The individual scout not only participated in the “strengthening of his body (taqwiyyat jismihī)” but also the “activation of his mind (tanshīt ʿaqlihī).” In pursuit of these goals, the scout undertook “great journeys to see the geography of his country and its heritage.” In addition to familiarizing scouts with a national milieu, al-Dandashi saw the trips as vital components of scouts’ ability to navigate society, helping them to become “sophisticated in the classes of people (yaḥnak bi-tabaqāt al-nās).” All of these dynamics of scouting informed al-Dandashi’s belief that “the expression ‘athletic
groups’ does not encompass the scouting movement according to the correct meaning of scouting.”

But what baffled al-Dandashi even more was the French failure to perceive the mutual interest of the authorities and the scouts in preserving the quintessential mandatory virtue of *nizām*. Responding to the French claims to be imposing order on the movement, al-Dandashi, speaking for the scouts, retorted, “We are the first to welcome order and call for it.” In this respect, the disciplinary functions of two institutions conflicted: the French mandate authorities wanted to maintain control over the political situation while the scouting troops wanted to mold citizens of the emerging nation. Al-Dandashi viewed this molding effort as a necessity, citing an absence “in our societal upbringing” that only scouting could fill. Again, emphasizing both the literal and the spiritual, al-Dandashi expressed a hope that even those who did not join scouting institutions, those who lacked “clothes and medals and ranks” might still be scouts in “their trust and faith.” Al-Dandashi believed that although all citizens could not join the scouts, the nation required every citizen to believe in the scouting principle of order.

One of the final interviews conducted by *Al-Qabas*, with Fa’iz al-Dalati, further demonstrated the religious context as well as some of the class dimensions of the project. Referred to as the “founder of the scouting revival in Damascus after the war,” al-Dalati had helped form the Mu’awiyya troop of scouts, which were closely affiliated with the Farir school.\(^\text{15}\) Like with other scouting troops, religious holidays provided occasions for many of their activities. They participated in scouting gatherings during Eid al-Fitr in Beirut and Eid al-Adha in Damascus. Al-Dalati’s commentary also revealed the class

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\(^{15}\) There was no mention of affiliation with the Mu’awiyya athletic club.
dimensions of the scouting project. At the camp-out in Damascus during Eid al-Adha, al-Dalati claimed that the Mu‘awiyya scouts helped to provide funding for the scouting organizations by selling food and drink to onlookers. “No one from Mu‘awiyya was too shy,” he recalled, “despite being from the most deep-rooted (a‘araq) families to carry cups of lemonade, for example, to sell them to the attending masses.” The remark is noteworthy for two points. First, al-Dalati identified the members of the scouting troop as the scions of old families. Second, he took pride in the fact that they comported themselves without the trappings of class privilege.

As was made clear by al-Bitar and al-Dandashi, the scouting movement in Damascus was deeply connected to developments within the region. Calls for change or claims made in Baghdad, Beirut, and Cairo resonated with folks in Damascus. In the summer of 1935, Al-Qabas summarized a report issued by the Iraqi youth group al-Futuwa, revealing the international dimensions of the movement and its principles. Although the document described developments within the Iraqi context, the internationally referential nature of the report as well as the commonalities between youth activities in Iraq and the Sham underscore a degree of shared consciousness between the various youth groups operating at the time in the region. Regarding other youth organizations, the Futuwa mentioned a veritable rainbow of shirt colors: red shirts in India, green shirts in Egypt, black shirts in Italy, brown shirts in Germany, and blue shirts in China in addition to similarly oriented English, Scottish, and Bulgarian youth brigades. The report lauded the efforts of several Arab scouting troops, showing a regard for both nationalist resistance and the display of proper manliness. They mentioned the Abi

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‘Abida corps in Palestine, “which camped on the shores to prevent Zionist immigrants” from entering the country. Additionally, they commended the “displays of manliness and chivalry (rujūla wa futuwa) among the youth of the Syrian Muslim scouts.” The Syrian scouting movement was not only influenced by international cultural flows; it also possessed an international reputation.17

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how notions of class accompanied the national project in the scouting movement. Through scouting, the movement’s leaders sought to recruit educated middle- and upper-class young men to engage in their nation-making activities, primarily expeditions that created a sense of physical space. If this chapter profiled how the idea of the nation became connected to class hierarchies and notions of propriety through physical activity, the next chapter will follow how physical activity came to be presented as national, tracing the biographies of several athletes of modernity and antiquity in the process.

17 The scouting movement revived its activities in the spring of 1935 after reaching a compromise with French mandate authorities in relation to decree of 1934.
CHAPTER THREE
ANATOMIES OF ATHLETES: MIGRATION, AUTHENTICITY, AND CALLS FOR GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

In addition to covering athletic events in the summer of 1935, Al-Qabas also published a series of biographies of Syrian athletes, profiling some of the seminal figures in modern Syrian athletics in the recurring “Our Champions (Abtāluna)” series. Their stories revealed some important themes in Syrian physical culture at this time. To begin with, migration figured essentially in each narrative. The paucity of quality local training facilities prompted these figures to go abroad for their physical education. Upon return, some attempted to establish training facilities like those they had experienced abroad. But the men generally struggled to maintain their athletic form as the local athletic infrastructure remained underdeveloped. Nevertheless, changes were occurring. The men’s participation in local athletic contests and their apparent public notoriety attested to the growing awareness of athletics in Damascene public life. In addition to describing these athletic conditions, the authors of the articles advocated for specific policies. Citing the the hardships faced by the athletes in their quests for physical perfection, the authors called for greater government involvement in athletics. On the very same pages upon which these profiles appeared, Al-Qabas carried a series of articles by Wasal al-Halwani about slightly less contemporary examples of Arab physical activity successes. Al-Halwani described the athletic feats of Imam ‘Ali and the jahaliyya hero al-Sulayk, among others, creating a glorious athletic past for Syria and Arabs in general.¹ I will

¹ In the context of late nineteenth century Iran, Marashi calls this dynamic “the authentication of modernity,” by which he means the process through which “the classical period became a template on which decidedly modern and scientific characteristics were inscribed. In this way the tension between
attempt to understand both the series on champions of modernity and heroes of antiquity in relation to Partha Chatterjee’s contention about place of difference within nationalist discourses. How did the “derivative discourse” of nationalism, to borrow Chatterjee’s formulation, manifest itself in Syrian physical culture?

The first narrative in the “Our Champions” series demonstrated the inadequacy of local training facilities compared with foreign institutions. The subject of the biography, Sa’ib Bey al-‘Azm, barely completed primary school before he “felt that athletics owned him personally.” Due to the dearth of athletics institutions in Syria, he left for Paris, where he joined a local school focused on physical education. After concerted study in the philosophy of sport under the tutelage of some of the most famous professors and coaches of athletics in the world, Sa’ib Bey received his diploma in physical education. Before returning to Syria, he undertook an athletics tour of Europe, wrestling English, German, French, Swiss, and Turkish athletes.

While his achievement of mixed success in these encounters with Europeans contributed partly to his fame and notoriety, the article also made clear that he became something of a folk hero for his feats of strength. The choice of Sa’ib Bey as the first athlete profiled by the newspaper was clear to the author due to his notoriety. Referred to

traditional culture and modern standards of progress could be negotiated by discovering nineteenth-century standards of progress in the national past.” Marashi, Nationalizing Iran, 55.
3 With respect to migration and hybrid notions of modernity in Lebanon, Akram Khater writes, “In the mahjar emigrants had grappled with a hegemonic society that demanded that they abandon their “traditional” ways and embrace “modernity” in order to be permitted entry. Hence, and on their return to Lebanon, emigrants could not but infuse the debates, arguments and compromises that made up their most recent social history in the mahjar into their villages and towns. Whether they were visiting for a spell or going back for good, they crammed their trunks with the stuff of the new hybrid culture which they struggled to make in the mahjar.” Akram Khater, Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender, and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870-1920 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 109. The cases of the heroes profiled in Al-Qabas underscore the fact that as Syrians moved to and returned from Egypt, Brazil, and Europe, they carried new ideas about sport and physical culture in their trunks as well.
as a “leader” of Syrian athletes, the author of the column further described him as well-known to residents of the region; the “strength of his power was the conversation of the people in greater Syria.” The author additionally encouraged the reader to “ask about” Sa’ib Bey; it would not take long, the author claimed, for people to explain how Sa’ib “stopped the wagon of his father which two horses were pulling” or “how he carried a horse from the lowest step and he brought it to the highest floor of his house.”\(^4\) They might also tell the querulous reader about “how he grabbed the famous champion Iskandar Donlij by his neck while wrestling him and almost killed him from the strength of his grip.” The author’s confidence in these responses attested to the notoriety of al-‘Azm, further supporting the notion of popular awareness of athletes and physical culture.

Upholding Sa’ib Bey as a role model, the article also lamented the physical shortcomings of the current generation of youth. Well into his fifties at the time of this article’s publication, Sa’ib Bey still upheld his strength even as his mustache and temples had become grey. For both his storied career and his maintenance of physical form, the author stated, “Sa’ib represents an example to be imitated among the lines of the youth.” In addition to emulating Sa’ib, however, the author believed that athletics was an “art” and, accordingly, required training under the tutelage of experts. Yet these developed youth were nowhere to be found. The author addressed the situation rhetorically, “Where are the students of sports from our sons from the institutes of the East and the West?” The author responded to the question pessimistically, noting that “nothing responds to us

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\(^4\) Morris mentions that in 1920 the Chinese track star Chen Zhang’e “ran a race against a train; his reputation soared after he defeated the train and proved the Chinese/human body’s capacity to better even this ultimate symbol of modernity and commerce.” Perhaps the mythic feats of strength performed by Sa’ib Bey underscore the continued importance of agriculture and husbandry as parts of the Syrian cultural context. Morris, Marrow of the Nation, 72.
except the ringing of the echo.” With this pessimistic assessment in mind, the author claimed “our champions will not realize the peak of Sa’ib Bey unfortunately and will not reach the pinnacle of his height in the days of his youth or the vigor of his strength.” The author granted some hope that the prediction might be false, given the recent opening of the Syrian Olympic Club with a goal of “training amateurs in artistic modern organization.” The column concluded with the author stating, “It is hoped that this club will be like the clubs of Egypt and the West god-willing.”

This final line illustrated two key components of this understanding of progress: first, the primacy of Egypt as a local mediator of technologies of advancement; and second, the absence of a stigma attached to mimicry of the West. Although the author conveyed a general desire for the establishment of institutions within Syria, there was no compunction about adopting techniques and methodologies of the West. Both of these components resembled the interplay of nationalism and physical culture in China in the same time period. With respect to openness to Western methods of organization, Andrew Morris writes that China “was remarkably free of the thought that supposed a great and absolute dichotomy between China and the West.” At the same time, Morris notes “how crucial the Japanese presence and experience was in ‘translating’ modernity into forms and language acceptable and comprehensible to Chinese modernizers.” Egypt occupied a similar place for Syrian elites.

The next champion presented in the series similarly discovered his love for athletics in Syria but found immense difficulties maintaining a training regimen in the environment. The man’s name was Mahmud al-Bahrah. He made his name as a

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5 Ibid., 53.
6 Ibid., 6.
weightlifter and gymnast, famously performing before the December 1931 football match between Bardi and Mu‘awiyya. His love for athletics began years before that December afternoon, when, in his youth, he “made up his mind to be one of these active players but he was not able to execute his desire until he moved to the Tajhiz.” Yet even at the Tajhiz, al-Bahrain grappled with inadequate facilities for his training, which forced he and his comrades to go to Martyr’s Square after school to run and wrestle. By 1924, however, the group of athletes succeeded in establishing a sports arena at the Tajhiz. After a year of training, al-Bahrain had established himself as one of the school’s most gifted athletes, “able to undertake the most difficult gymnastic movements.” In recognition of his talent, “he was charged with representing Damascus in an athletic festival undertaken in Beirut.” He acquitted himself quite well, securing several prizes and he returned to Damascus “full of enthusiasm and activity.” Later in the year, the Tajhiz held its own festival and, again, students of the Tajhiz in general and al-Bahrain in particular displayed their skill. Al-Bahrain was named gymnastics champion of Damascus. Al-Bahrain’s successes showed the continued emphasis on the local rather than the national level of competition at this time. But his days in Damascus were numbered. The next director of the Tajhiz did not support athletics, fearing the “danger to the students.” The subsequent director of the Tajhiz, ‘Ali al-Jaza’iri, was even more staunchly opposed to athletics. The article claimed that al-Jaza’iri “announced a war on athletic students and began to oppress them.” In 1928, al-Jaza’iri expelled al-Bahrain from the Tajhiz, crushing his prospects for moving to the Baccalaureate level of study. The author of the article presented al-Bahrain as something of an athletic martyr in light

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of this decision, writing that al-Bahrah bore the burden of his “love of athletics, a burden that no one carried before him and no one will carry after him.”

The author’s claims of the unparalleled nature of al-Bahrah’s situation aside, al-Bahrah responded to his problem like many athletes before and after him: leaving Syria, demonstrating an understanding of modernity and progress existing outside of Syria. After overcoming the shock of his expulsion, al-Bahrah began to train on his own in Syria with the goal of becoming the world middle-weight champion in weight-lifting. Under the tutelage of a private coach, al-Bahrah reached a point where he was able to lift 120 kilograms (al-Bahrah himself weighed 72 kilograms). When Sa’ib Bey found his opportunities for advancement in Syria lacking, he moved to Europe for further training. Al-Bahrah, on the other hand, moved to Egypt in 1930, suggesting the multiple sites of modernity and progress in this context. In many non-European histories, authors privilege the encounter between Europe and non-Europe, the metropole and the colony. Although al-Bahrah’s move to Egypt does not detract from the importance of this encounter between Europe and non-Europe, it does suggest an alternative encounter as part of developing conceptions of modernity and progress.

Egyptians welcomed al-Bahrah warmly and admired “his huge muscles and beautiful athletic body.” Al-Bahrah learned much from his time in Egypt and he returned to Damascus eager to continue his own personal development as well as aid the development of his peers and students. But despite his enthusiasm for “establishing athletic clubs on the basis of Egyptian clubs” in Syria, he found little support for his plans from either the government or his colleagues.

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8 As Mitchell states, “When themes and categories developed in one historical context, such as a region of the colonial world, are reused elsewhere in the service of different social arrangements and political tactics, there is an inevitable process of displacement and reformulation.” Mitchell, “The Stage of Modernity,” 7.
and plunged into a four-year period of hibernation where he forsook involvement in athletics. According to *Al-Qabas*, only in 1934 did al-Brahrah return to training at the encouragement of his friends. The article presented this development in a hopeful tone, noting that having recommitted himself to training, he recently lifted 133 kilograms and, moreover, was “tireless in his training, hoping to succeed in approaching” the world record. Thus concluded the narrative of Mahmud al-Brahrah, a didactic story of youthful promise, self-imposed exile, and, finally, redemption.

Al-Brahrah’s redemption, however, did not coincide with national athletic redemption; this, after all, required government support of athletics, which the article’s author strongly advocated. Mentioning the “sacrifices” that Mahmud al-Brahrah made in the service of athletics, the author reasoned that “if he did not succeed in establishing athletic clubs here then it is because the government of ours does not encourage athletics.” The author made one particular prescription for government intervention into the bodily sphere: “indeed Mahmud al-Brahrah is of the best of the unique athletes who serve athletics and exert much for its cause in the way of time and money…it is necessary to call the Ministry of Education to make use of his skill to teach athletics in the schools and oversee games in them.” Mahmud al-Brahrah had the strength to lift quite a lot; but according to the author, he alone could not raise the athletic spirit in Syria. This task required government support for the efforts of al-Brahrah and others like him to come to fruition.

Like al-Brahrah and al-‘Azm, the third athlete profiled in the biography series, ‘Az al-Din al-Saman, developed an interest in athletics while enrolled in Damascus schools yet he quickly became dissatisfied with the athletic culture in his home country and
received the bulk of his training abroad. As a boy, Abu al-‘Az, as his peers referred to him, loved sports and Eddie Polo movies.\(^9\) He quickly became known for his skill in the former during his time at the al-Nashi’iyah al-‘Arabiyyah school, where he spent a lot of time practicing in the school’s sporting arena. His interest in athletics grew further in 1922 when he attended a circus of gymnastics in Damascus. The director of the circus encouraged Abu al-‘Az to flee Damascus and join the touring act. Abu al-‘Az was convinced. A mere twelve years old, he reportedly walked all the way from Damascus to the next stop of the circus, which happened to be Haifa. The authorities intervened, however, and returned Abu al-‘Az to Damascus at the behest of his family. Forcibly returned to his home, Abu al-‘Az entered the Tajhiz and continued his training regimen for two years.\(^10\) But his wanderlust persisted: “the thought of traveling to a country in which sports arenas were in abundance did not cease.” He and two of his peers hatched a plan to travel to America secretly. They ended up in Brazil in 1925, where they took meager salaries as part of an athletic circus. The author wrote that “their skills improved…and their bodies strengthened.” Moreover, ‘Az al-Din quickly distinguished himself: “it became clear that ‘Az al-Din was more advanced than all of the other players of the circus.” But at only fifteen years old, ‘Az al-Din missed his family terribly. He


\(^10\) Worth noting is that each of the figures profiled attended school and two of them attended the Damascus Tajhiz, which was by most accounts the best public school in Syria. Although my lack of access to internal athletic club records prevents an extensive analysis of the class background of athletes, the educational backgrounds of al-‘Azm, al-Bahrah, and al-Saman imply that these particular athletes – held up as heroes – probably came from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, as even in the 1930s lower-class enrollment in the Tajhiz remained quite limited. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate*, 410-411. The probable bourgeois pedigree of the champions presented here contrasts with other athletic contexts, where sport presented an opportunity for the popular classes to ease bourgeois fears of class-based violence. Looking at Russia in midst of the social upheaval following the 1905 Revolution, McReynolds argues that wrestling provided a space where “peasant champions could display their physical self-control to soothe apprehensions.” Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 136.
and one of his Damascene colleagues decided to return to the “homeland (waṭan).”

Lacking money, they worked as sailors on a steamship bound for England for two and a half months, disembarking at Cardiff. ‘Az al-Din and his comrade moved to London and then to Paris. They toured France, inspecting the athletic clubs and facilities. Eventually, they returned to Damascus, imbued with athletic knowledge and skill from their time abroad.

Al-Saman’s competitive career once he returned to Damascus underscored both the growth of athletics in Damascus as well as the continued tension between local and national identifications. When ‘Az al-Din returned in the late twenties, “he found athletics more widespread than before, especially wrestling.” Displaying the same ease with people which allowed him to win over the director of a circus at the age of twelve, ‘Az al-Din impressed the Lebanese wrestling champion Yusuf Barza sufficiently that Barza took ‘Az al-Din as a student. After a three-month training period, ‘Az al-Din evidently considered himself in good form. With typical bravado, he challenged members of any weight class to a fight through an announcement in the press. Opponents responded. ‘Az al-Din wrestled Lutfi al-Nuri, who outweighed ‘Az al-Din by thirteen kilograms, in a match under the auspices of the American University in Beirut. ‘Az al-Din tied the larger man. Next ‘Az al-Din wrestled the vaunted ‘Abd al-Masih Wahba of Lebanon and delivered a crushing defeat, which, according to the article, placed ‘Az al-Din within the local sporting firmament as “a star of stars of athletics in Damascus.” His rise continued as he defeated the Lebanese champion Naim Salama despite the “great size of the muscles” of the latter. ‘Az al-Din reached his apogee in 1931, when he wrestled the Lebanese champion Najib Yasin in an athletic festival attended by 150 athletes from
Damascus as well. Although Yasin outweighed al-Saman by 17 kilograms, al-Saman managed to tie the larger man, which allowed ‘Az al-Din to hold the title of middle weight champion of Lebanon and Syria for 1931. From the lively competition circuit to the use of the newspaper to solicit opponents, the prominence of athletics in the public sphere had clearly grown since Abu al-‘Az’s youth. As with al-Bahrah’s case, the description of al-Saman’s activities also underscored the continued negotiation of the boundaries between local city identities and broader national identities. While Abu al-‘Az took the title of champion of Lebanon and Syria, for the most part he competed as a representative of Damascus rather than the nation.

In addition to competing with local athletes, al-Saman wrestled international figures; the author of the article utilized the results of these matches to make another call for government involvement in athletic support. Only a week before the publication of the article, al-Saman fell in a match with the German world champion Edmund Kramer. Al-Saman, known for his ability to defeat opponents heavier than him, had a taste of his own medicine, as the article noted that the German prevailed “with his skill more than his strength.” Al-Qabas maintained hope, however, expressing a wish that ‘Az al-Din “make up” for the loss. In the author’s view, the necessity of government support for athletics was the enduring lesson of this loss. Noting how ‘Az al-Din had benefited from his time in Europe learning some of the secrets of his “art,” the author called for the government to fund delegations of athletes to Europe. ‘Az al-Din and his “cultured athletic comrades” had persevered in pursuit of establishing their arts sans government support. As a result, they “plant paths coming and going” from the country. To keep these
cultured, talented, morally virtuous young men within the country, the author charged the government with providing “money to help them to build their bodies.”

As with the stories of al-‘Azm and al-Bahrah, al-Saman’s narrative provided a glimpse into athletic development in Syria. Although the athletics component of Syrian schools initially nurtured his interest, ‘Az al-Din felt compelled to move abroad for training. When he returned, something of an athletic public sphere had developed in which public interest, print media, and athletic expertise came together to make the athletic champion possible. In the author’s view, however, whatever ‘Az al-Din achieved in the way of stardom occurred in spite of the government rather than due to it. The author closed the article by arguing for government-supported body-building.

While the “Our Champions” series privileged the athletic practices of Syria’s sojourning champions, another series that ran on the very same pages more fully articulated the moral benefits of athletic activity and its place within Arab culture. In the first of these articles, Wasal al-Halwani posed a question that had surely plagued minds since antiquity: “can you become courageous if you eat the heart of a lion?” For all of those who were deeply interested in the answer to al-Halwani’s question, the content of the article might have proved somewhat disappointing, as al-Halwani’s real interest was not so much answering the question as discussing the nature of courage and its history among the Arabs. He began by outlining the scientific understanding of this quality, which some psychologists presented as an acquired trait “that upbringing improves and practice polishes.” According to this school of thought, then, certain activities could have a salutary effect on someone’s level of courage. As an example of one means for the

“fearful or cowardly to change his condition,” al-Halwani mentioned “eating a heart of the hearts of lions or predators after cutting it from their chests.” For the fearful person who did not frequently encounter lions prepared to have their hearts cut out, al-Halwani helpfully included less dramatic but no less useful measures for conquering fear such as walking in the dark with the supervision of a teacher. To this group of measures ameliorative of cowardice, al-Halwani also added sports. In the opinion of some “scholars of sports,” athletic training could potentially inculcate a sense of courage in participants. With this last point, al-Halwani positioned himself within a discourse which understood athletics as a means of improving the moral condition of humans. But he also more concretely situated this need in the national context by stating that “our youth are in need” of such measures. In al-Halwani’s reckoning, courage meant nothing more than “clear-sightedness” and “self-control” in trying times, qualities necessary for any good “soldier” or “explorer.” Most importantly in al-Halwani’s view, courage meant not simply self-defense but rather “defense of self and nation (waṭan) and family and neighbor.” (emphasis is mine) Clearly, the virtue of courage, understood as the teachable willingness to sacrifice self in the name of the collective, figured importantly in the process of nation-making. 

Although he accused the contemporary youth of a lack of courage, al-Halwani did not believe this condition arose for lack of more culturally relevant, if perhaps dated, exemplars of this quality. Right next to the article on the contemporary physical prowess

12 Al-Halwani and other theorists saw athletics as a means of cultivating virtues required for the nation. These qualities were also imbricated in an increasingly industrialized world economy. In the Canadian context, Howell writes, “Team sports were considered more effective than individual sports in promoting fair play, physical hardiness, physical and mental well-being, courage, endurance, teamwork, efficiency, self-restrain, competitiveness, and respect for others. All of these qualities were perceived as essential characteristics of a leadership in the new industrial age.” Howell, Blood, Sweat, and Cheers, 31.
of Saʿib Bey al-ʿAzm, al-Halwani lauded the virtues of a hero of antiquity: Imam ʿAli ibn abi Talib, whom al-Halwani called “the master of champions without doubt.” Al-Halwani did not describe ʿAli as distinctly Syrian. Nevertheless, the fourth caliph to succeed the Prophet Muhammad as the ruler of the Islamic empire in the mid-seventh century connected with emerging conceptions of the Syrian nation as Arab and Muslim. Although al-Halwani’s emphasis remained on the somewhat abstract virtue of courage, he also touched on the physical manifestations of this personality trait, calling ʿAli “the master of the courageous in jahiliyya and Islam” and, moreover, “a miracle of bodily strength (muʿjizat al-quwwa al-badaniyya).” Al-Halwani directly connected this physical strength with martial prowess: Ali “did not come across one person who was equal to him in strength of forearm… and all of the Arabs feared his power in war.” Like the understanding of courage as defense of others in addition to self, this final point illuminated the connection between bodily strength and capacity for war-making, an axiomatic link embraced by many physical activity enthusiasts of the day.  

13 While al-Halwani presents ʿAli as muscle-bound athlete, Jacob describes how in 1930s Egypt Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, described the Prophet Muhammad as an “uber-scout” in an effort to attract boys to his scouting troop. Jacob, “Working out Egypt,” 201.
14 Zionist thinkers also identified ancient forbears who exemplified physical fitness, encouraging “Jews to reconnect with their Jewish past and with ancient Jewish heroes like Bar Kochba.” Mayer, “From Zero to Hero: Masculinity in Jewish Nationalism,” 287. The presentation of religious figures as athletic extended to Christianity, too; the muscular Christianity movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century in America and Britain emphasized “Christ’s robust manliness” in an effort to fend off the effeminization brought on by urban development. Clifford Putney, Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 93.
More broadly, the attention to Imam ‘Ali presented an authentic embodiment of courage and physical might alongside the contemporary athletes who were forced to leave their nation in order to find proper training and guidance in physical activities.\(^{16}\) While the treatment of men like al-Azm, al-Bahrah, and al-Saman did not problematize their reliance on foreign expertise and training methods for their athletic development, al-Halwani’s article illuminated what might be considered a purely indigenous model for physical strength and ability. The acceptance of western external expertise and the attempt to maintain some indigenous essence fits with Partha Chatterjee’s understanding of anticolonial nationalism as characterized by an effort “to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture.”\(^{17}\) In the concluding remark of this column, al-Halwani further staked his claim to indigenous authenticity: “we will tell the reader in a coming article about the courage of the Arabs and tales of their strength to teach that the champions of the world today have not realized the peak of the Arabs in their strength.”

True to his word, al-Halwani’s next column again emphasized contemporary ignorance of the historical physical achievements of Arabs, yet al-Halwani also used this situation to lament more explicitly the current state of Arab society. To begin an article

\(^{16}\) The dynamic relates to Israel Gershoni’s treatment of the meta-history of nationalism in the region: “While acknowledging nationalism’s external (i.e., European) sources, the new narrative emphasizes the particular cultural-historical experience of the Middle East, with its specific modes of appropriation and reproduction of nationalism that recreate it in ‘Arab’ form. In this regard, nationalism is understood as both a program for modern innovation and an indigenous culture of invented tradition.” Israel Gershoni, “Rethinking the Formation of Arab Nationalism in the Middle East, 1920-1945,” in Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East, eds. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 14.

entitled “The Champions of the West have not realized the Peak of al-Sulayk,” Al-Halwani praised a number of courageous Arab forebears, among them Khalid bin al-Walid, the conqueror of Damascus. Al-Halwani also continued to associate bodily strength with courage. He mentioned Muhammad ibn al-Hanifa bin ‘Ali ibn abi Talib, who “was strong of body and muscle and inherited strength from his father like he inherited courage.” This exhaustive list of physically powerful and courageous Arabs fortified al-Halwani’s claim that “history is overflowing” with examples of heroes such as these men. Al-Halwani concluded with yet another tale of Arab physical prowess. He boasted that “no runners East or West” have achieved the glory of the jahiliyya poet and politician-cum-athlete Sulayk. His speed was so great, claimed al-Halwani, that he ran down and “caught a gazelle” by its “fat.” But, al-Halwani complained, for all of the glory of “our grandfathers…we ruined it.” If these earlier generations provided a framework for posterity to “arrive at the fruit of freedom,” al-Halwani claimed, “we sold the land, and we exterminated the seed and we ate the fruits.” For al-Halwani, then, these earlier models of virtue and physical prowess provided both an authentic example of physical achievement as well as cause to lament current national deficiencies.

Al-Halwani and the authors of “Our Champions” agreed that Syria suffered from a physical languor on a national scale. The authors of “Our Champions” made explicit claims for government intervention into this aspect of citizens’ lives, calling repeatedly for government sponsorship of athletics; alongside the “Our Champions” column and its protagonists’ international migrations for athletic training, al-Halwani provided a local narrative of athletic fitness. I have traced the circuits of these athletic development

narratives geographically - through Egypt, Brazil, and Europe – and temporally – from the twentieth-century to pre-Islamic times. In the final chapter I will look at how these narratives converged in Syrian governmental policy toward physical culture. But first, another detour is required, this one less far afield, to examine how the peasant became an object of reform and what this particular project meant for ideas about nation and class.
CHAPTER 4

SAVING THE PEASANT, CREATING THE NATION: CLASS AND COMMUNITY SERVICE IN THE VILLAGE RECOVERY PROGRAM

At the same time as many middle- and upper-class urban dwellers hoped to reform the bodies of Syrian men through organized physical activities, several programs aimed at saving the peasant emerged across the region, responding to the disastrous agricultural conditions of the 1930s. In this chapter, I will examine the effort of saving, explaining both what saving meant and who was doing the saving. To do so, I will investigate rural aid programs that generally placed students and young professionals in the countryside to provide medical services and teach modern hygiene to the peasant population. I will begin by tracing the development of two such regional plans in Beirut and Baghdad, respectively, and the ways these organizations related to a program subsequently established in Damascus in the late 1930s. Looking at the regional dimensions of this practice of saving the peasant fits with my broader effort to show that the boundaries drawn on napkins by European diplomats did not limit the perspectives of mandate residents.

The emergence of the peasant as an object of reform also connects with the broader physical culture of the time period and the increasing calls for the nation-state to intervene on behalf of the health of its citizens. In the realms of football and scouting, writers and politicians asserted local societal order and a place within an international order by suggesting that primarily middle- and upper-class men’s fitness figured

1 Regarding the convergence of nationalist and colonial actors on the topic of the peasant, Chatterjee writes, “both colonial and nationalist politics thought of the peasantry as an object of their strategies, to be acted upon, controlled, and appropriated within their respective structures of state power.” Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, 159.
prominently in the well-being of the nation. In the realm of peasant reform, writers and politicians linked the bodily health of the peasant with the health of the nation. In both cases, the health of individual citizens became connected to the nation. Thus, the “what” of saving aligned with the physical culture imperatives. The “who” of saving did so as well. On the playing field and in the scouting camp, middle and upper-class men were expected to improve themselves. Although writers encouraged greater government involvement in these affairs, the endeavor remained a phenomenon of something like self-help, essentially reform of the bourgeois by the bourgeois. Yet the concern with the peasant demonstrated a departure from this self-help model. Peasants needed saving; but they were unable to do so on their own. Only through the intervention of benevolent elites could the peasant see the light of a hygienic and healthful bodily modernity.  

Thus, the larger class dimensions of the national project as a bourgeois endeavor persisted. Another commonality with elements of physical culture such as scouting was that the peasant reform programs claimed to be apolitical. Clearly, the language referred to politics in a most narrow sense but the claims of not being political also functioned importantly within the nation making process, downplaying the novelty of the practices being performed in these cultural spaces and underscoring the relevance of the quotidian as vital for understanding the articulation and performance of national concepts. The goal, then, is to investigate the political and class dimensions of the allegedly apolitical program.

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2 In considering the apparent distance between middle-class notions of national rejuvenation through physical fitness and the daily lives of most Egyptians, Jacob suggests that on the contrary, “One might argue that it was the fact of their propinquity in space and a desire for distance from the heinous bodies populating the everyday of urban life that conditions this seemingly disconnected discourse.” Jacob, “Working out Egypt,” 313. Although the diseased peasants whom the Village Recovery program aimed to treat were far removed from urban centers, many of their comrades had migrated to urban areas during the 1930s, weak and emaciated from the famines that the region suffered in these years.
In the fall of 1936, *Al-Qabas* ran a series of articles treating the AUB’s Village Recovery Program following its fourth summer of sending students and professors to work in village aid projects.\(^3\) Inaugurated in 1933, the student-led initiative expanded gradually over four years to send out several relief teams to rural areas in Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine each summer, spending several weeks in each location. The groups provided medical services, taught scientific childrearing techniques, and encouraged new agricultural methods. Underscoring a class-coded term used frequently in treatments of physical culture, the program’s slogan was “from the cultured youth to the peasants.” Jennifer Dueck confirms the class implications of the project in a discussion of a broader AUB initiative known as the Civic Welfare League, describing the entire program as an attempt “to guide the spirit and energies of the population toward constructive patriotism and away from political fomentation.”\(^4\)

The annual report further revealed an understanding of the peasant as the foundational aspect of Arab society and a clear anxiety about the development of an urban professional class alienated from the rural life. Expounding upon the notion of the peasant as the pillar of society, the annual report extended this characterization to a regional level, noting “that the countries of the Near East which students of the university come from are agricultural and village countries.” The report added, “The village is the basis of the being of the country (*al-qarya asās kiyan al-balad*).”\(^5\) The causes of these

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\(^4\) Dueck, “A Muslim Jamboree,” 511.
\(^5\) On the topic of the discursive placement of peasants in relation to the Egyptian nation in the 1930s, Omnia El-Shakry writes, “We may view the peasantry as the central contradiction of national identity within Egyptian colonial society – at the same time that they were localized by the nationalist elite as the repository of cultural authenticity, they were also demarcated as a locus of backwardness to be reformed and reconstituted as modern moral subjects of the nation-state.” Omnia El-Shakry, *The Great Social*
issues were myriad, from the weather to the vagaries of international market forces. But the cultured youth of AUB directed blame at none other than themselves, complaining of the “ignorance and contempt on the part of the educated youth” toward the peasant. More broadly, they attributed the “societal crookedness” of the peasant plight to a broad swath of professionals. Like Muhammad Halawa, who in 1932 accused urban professionals of deficient physical fitness, the AUB students similarly aimed their criticisms at this segment of society. The report called out the “doctors and pharmacists and lawyers and graduates of high schools and colleges and farming experts too” who “swarm and crowd together in cities” and become “cut off…from the life of the village.”

As the report more fully fleshed out the dimensions of the solution to the problem of the peasant, the organization’s trenchant critique of educated elites came more fully into focus. As a rudiment of the program, the report stated that “the real actual patriotism (al-waṭaniyya al-ḥaqa al-fāʿala) is not undertaken in vocal blustering (al-jājaʿ al-kalamīyya) but rather in productive work and in silent sacrifice for the sake of societal reform which the country lacks.” Although not explicitly critiquing elder nationalist leaders and their endless conferences and negotiations, the implication of these words was far from opaque.

Like the scouting movement, even as the program engaged in a deeply political process of nation-making, the report denied the political nature of the project. The

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6 The connection between the disparagement of urban lifestyles as inauthentic and the colonial imposition of modernity is not explicit here. In 1920s Korea, in contrast, Sorensen implicates colonialism in this dynamic, suggesting that “the colonial situation” prompted “intellectuals to cast question of national identity in a characteristic form that equates Koreanness with the peasantry and modernity with foreignness.” Clark Sorensen, “National Identity and the Creation of the Category “Peasant” in Colonial Korea,” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, eds. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1999), 309.
program, in their eyes, was “of general national service (khidma waṭaniyya ‘amma).” Its participants “came from different religions and sects but they worked together with one hand in pursuit of one principle.” In denying the political nature of their program, the report’s writers used the term politics in a narrow sense, as pertaining to specific party structures or sectarian goals. Clearly, the nationalization of public health and the nation’s reliance on specific forms of expert knowledge had important political implications. One was the vision of a unified nation, irrespective of sectarian identities or interests. Another implication was the naturalization of the nation-state model, in which the political nature of these transformations in conceptions of being in relation to states was considered the norm. The Village Recovery Program was remarkable for exemplifying the process of simultaneously making and silencing: making the bonds which connect individual selves to the nation and silencing the notion that such a state of affairs is anything other than timeless.

A very similar rural development project emerged at the same time in Iraq, where the peasant also became an object to be reformed by so-called enlightened youth. By the mid-1930s, Iraqi scouts were distinctly more institutionalized and militarized than its Syrian counterparts. By 1935, officials developed a pilot program which sent students to the countryside to revitalize the peasant. The Iraqi scouting organization hoped to send groups to “villages and rural areas” to promote a development agenda epitomized by the items that the groups wished to bring to the village areas: “soap, stored wheat, and aspirin.” In addition to attempts to improve the hygiene, nutrition, and health of Iraqi

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peasants, the students hoped to engage in more broad environmental engineering projects as well as reinforce the Iraqi police in their work to “enforce order and protect it.”

Both the programs of the AUB and Iraq received press attention in Damascus and numerous Syrian writers called for programs along very similar lines to be implemented in Syria. As early as 1935, following a report of a fundraising party held for the AUB program, an article added, “No doubt that the noble youth of Damascus will soon establish a team for undertaking something similar to this plan in the needy villages and extend the benefit to all of the Syrian villages on the coast and in the interior.”

Although the statement confirmed the perceived social origins of the program’s practitioners in the middle and upper-classes, nothing ultimately came of the rumblings for several years. In the fall of 1936 after another string of articles reviewing the AUB program’s success, a terse note appeared in Al-Qabas stating that some of the youth in Damascus had begun talks with the village revival program of AUB with the hope of “establishing a branch for it in Damascus and to provide for the service of the Syrian peasant.”

Finally in February 1937, Al-Qabas reported on a visit to Damascus by the leaders of the AUB program for the expressed purpose of expanding the program to Damascus.

The article on the visit emphasized several key points about the Village Recovery Plan that accused both the government and the youth of dereliction of their duties toward the well-being of the peasant. In accounting for the AUB program, Al-Qabas wrote, “The cultured Arab youth at the American University…witnessed ignorance in villages” as well as “ignorance of the government with respect to its duty to save peasants.”

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with physical culture at this time, reformers saw the bodily welfare of citizens as the realm of the government. Moreover, the plan’s summary further underscored points about the relationship between youth and the village. According to the article, “village youth…reject after completing their studies village living and life in its limited environment, so villages do not benefit from the knowledge of their sons.” In addition to demonstrating the clear gendered overtones of the project, this point indicated the ruptures in social order that increased educational opportunities had spawned. At the same time, the notion that the village required the guidance of urban knowledge persisted. Damascus officials apparently saw enough likenesses between these conditions and their own that the youth of Damascus invited AUB officials and leaders to discuss the program, “hoping to extend the blessings of this plan to their villages.” They emerged from their meetings with the goal of creating the first camp for the Damascus-based village recovery plan in the summer of 1937.

One thinker articulated some of the bodily dimensions of this reform project in an article later that spring, presenting a radically invasive program of development in national terms. In his April 1937 article, Shakir Al-‘As summarized the concept of the program as not rooted in providing “money” or building “temples” for the peasants but rather in “treatment of their bodies.”\footnote{Al-Qabas, “Mashru’a in’ash al-qariyya ‘amal qawmi,” 12 April 1937, 1,8.} He outlined a plan of action similar to the AUB program which included efforts to root out disease and illiteracy as well as teach “the mother to care for her children and the young man to undertake his duties.” In addition to providing technical agricultural advice to the peasants with respect to their livestock and their crops, Al-‘As included teaching “the spirit of noble sport” to the students as a
component of the plan. In sum, he wrote, “The goal consists of refining the spiritual and material and health level in the world of the peasants, men and women, old and young.”

Al-‘As’s stress on both material and spiritual presents a partial rejoinder to Chatterjee, who, as mentioned, sees that the anticolonial nationalist’s task in terms of an outer appropriation of western ideas of progress and an inner maintenance of some indigenous essence. Yet Shakir al-‘As described a program described which endeavored to reform both the material and spiritual in accordance with “modern” principles. This claim does not mean that al-‘As necessarily rejects any notion of indigenous difference with European powers. But his point underscores the breadth of the intervention envisioned by middle- and upper-class reformers.

Al-‘As’s analysis of the problem of the peasant mirrored the AUB program’s diagnosis in identifying elites as the cause of the peasants’ plight and the engine of national revival. For al-‘As, “disdain (istikhfāf) of the peasants” represented the primary cause of their downfall. By treating the “relations which connect the world of the peasants with ills” and, moreover, replacing “ignorance” with “concern” and “outrage” with “sympathy,” al-‘As hoped that educated Syrians might “sacrifice for the service of the peasant instead of…stealing from him.” If these changes occurred, al-‘As predicted a “general revival.” Like the AUB plan, al-‘As understood the revival of the nation as contingent upon the benevolence of the educated classes toward the peasants. Also like the AUB program, al-‘As understood the initiative in clear nationalist terms, describing it as among “the best fruit” which “adolescent patriotism (al-waṭaniyya al-yafī‘a) bore” for the “homeland (waṭan).” Interestingly, al-‘As understood the AUB project as well as

12 Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, 120.
anticipated projects emanating from Damascus as part of “awakening the Syrian people from its negligence (ghaflatihi).” Just as the AUB project conducted work irrespective of national boundaries, al-’As saw the work of the AUB students and future Damascus students to be part of the same Syrian revival project. Unfortunately, according to al-’As the majority of the Damascus youth were still “unaware” of the program. But he remained confident that once they learned more about the program, Damascus students would surely show considerable “concern and interest” in the program.

The meetings in early 1937 were successful and by the late spring of 1937, state officials had adopted the plan and held it as evidence of the nation’s pureness of virtue. On April 4, 1937, a number of officials met to celebrate the placing of the first stone of a school being built in the village of Jadida ‘Artuz. The article mentioned the redemptive qualities of the endeavor, calling the attendance at the event “good evidence of the goodness of morals of this nation (umma).” As with the AUB, another aspect emphasized by the authorities about the plan was its non-sectarian nature. Despite all of the “groups and individuals and parties and sects which do not all converge in support of unified work or unified policy,” the article claimed that the Village Recovery Program brought not only all of these actors together within Syria but more broadly brought Syria and Lebanon together as well: “this plan is the one that gathers its support – Syrian and Lebanese – in the Syrian lands and in the Lebanese lands together.” Al-Qabas recognized a broad range of actors for their participation in the plan, thanking the “youth who volunteered for the plan and the doctors and lawyers and professionals” who all contributed in order to “revive the villages and save the peasant.” Yet unlike the AUB

initiative, the Damascus effort enjoyed the close patronage of national political figures in addition to a student-run volunteer effort. Speakers at the party included ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Kayyali, a National Bloc member from Aleppo who would later become Minister of Education and Justice, as well as Fakhri al-Barudi, another important Bloc member who had been prominently involved in youth organizing. Additionally, the prime minister and the mayor of Damascus attended the event. The many speeches made in the course of the soiree lauded not only the student volunteers for “their patience and the strength of their resolve” but also the “national government (al-hakūma al-waṭaniyya) for its concern for this plan.”

The first year of the Damascus-based plan achieved sufficient success for a replication of the government backed effort to reform the bodily practices of peasants in another part of the country in 1938. A reporter from Al-Qabas made a trip to the camp in the town of Qarbaj al-Nirib, outside of Aleppo, in the summer of 1938 under the auspices of the director of the Ministry of Health and Ambulances, Dr. Subhi Ghazi. Like the AUB plan and the Iraq plan, the project’s volunteers were all engaged in various projects of uplift: the reporter specifically noted Dr. Razki Shakhashir, who had “volunteered for the program even though he came to Aleppo with his wife to spend their honey moon.” Tens of diseased villagers awaited the Dr. Shakhashir’s attention. The reporter also observed the work of the education committee of the plan. The reporter marveled at the love of education of the fathers who forced their children to enter the school. When questioned about this behavior, one of the fathers’ only response was an order to the reporter: “let him learn more words before you leave.” In the cultural sphere, professors and “cultured youth” helped in conflict resolution matters. A health committee “was able
to terminate many of the old customs” and adopt new ones, such as ensuring proper ventilation for huts, stopping children from playing in the dirt, and burying the carcasses of dead animals and livestock. An agricultural committee worked to provide modern techniques of planting and fighting pests to the peasants. Finally, the athletic committee succeeded in engaging the young, middle-aged, and old-aged in “various athletic games” that transformed the “bleak village” during the day into a “great stadium” at night where “more than a hundred villagers” participated in various athletic endeavors.

In covering the various aspects of the program, Al-Qabas coverage revealed yet again the connection of national work with certain social groups through physical exertion. The reporter understood the “highest goal” of the young people in the plan to be the creation of “a spirit of life in a band of the Syrian people…who represent the biggest part of the sons of this nation (waṭan).” In light of this noble goal, the reporter commended the “concern of the youth” and the “members of this humanitarian plan” for their willingness to “accept the call of duty and roll up to work.” The reporter conceived of this duty as part of the exigencies of the new national age and the particular bodily needs that the state demanded: “the young national age (al-‘ahad al-waṭanī al-nāshī’) is in need of their forearms…to train a gullible naïve people…for a sublime policy and the service of the country.”

14 Invoking the same part of the anatomy called for by Halawa and ‘Afifa Sa’b years before in relation to athletics, the Al-Qabas reporter underscored the hierarchical nature of the reform project. As in the realm of sporting and scouting, the work of making the nation through the Village Recovery Program remained generally

14 Some interesting research might be done in looking at the construction of the peasant as part of the national project as it relates to Hafez al-Asad who, as Batatu notes, was “the first ruler in Syria’s history…of peasant extraction.” Hanna Batatu, Syria’s Peasantry, the Descendants of its Lesser Rural Notables, and their Politics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 194.
in the hands of the middle and upper-class urban residents; the peasants – and the nation they represented – required elite guidance for salvation. In this way, the notion of saving the peasant clearly related to developments in physical culture. The way these new national government adopted these classed and gendered notions of nation-making in 1937 will be the topic of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 5

NATIONALIZING BODIES: PHYSICAL CULTURE ON THE EVE OF WORLD WAR II

The subject of this chapter is how physical culture manifested itself in the final years of the French mandate. The narrative lacks suspense; in many ways, the state won, institutionalizing the ideas about the connection between strong bodies and a strong nation that had fermented in Damascus school yards and gymnasiums for much of the last decade. But the important points have to do with what the state institutionalized. How were class and gendered notions about physical culture adopted or rejected by the state? Understanding these developments is crucial to understanding the politics of gender and class in post-colonial Syria.

In the final years of the mandate, the National Bloc captured power in a context where national dismemberment was very real. In January 1936, after years of fruitless treaty negotiations, Syrian nationalists engaged in a general strike which profoundly convulsed the mandate political system. Set off by the arrest of Fakhri al-Barudi and repressive tactics practiced against student protesters, the strike lasted for forty three days, concluding on March 2 when nationalist leaders traveled to France for treaty negotiations. Many saw the strike as “the National Bloc’s biggest triumph to date.” However, the time period also witnessed continued challenge to the National Bloc with the proliferation of proto-fascist youth groups outside of the complete control of the Bloc’s leaders. The most notable of these entities were the Iron Shirts, who developed a reputation as a roving band of street thugs. The Bloc’s struggled to maintain the

2 Ibid., 462.
allegiance of the group, a difficult task given that the group’s membership consisted primarily of “youthful and lower middle-class rebels” opposed to “bourgeois rulers.” These instabilities notwithstanding, after a summer of negotiations in Paris, French authorities initialed a new treaty that provided for a Syrian constitution, self-rule, and entry into the League of Nations. In September, the nationalists returned to Syria to a hero’s welcome. Elections were held in December 1936 and in January 1937 the new nationalist government assumed its post. They did not know it at the time, but the era of national independence was not to be; the French never officially ratified the treaty. But the nationalist government pressed on, presiding over the tumult of the final years of the decade when the loss of Alexandretta to Turkey, unrest in the eastern provinces, and the increasingly dire situation in Palestine Nevertheless, the nationalists wielded a degree of power unprecedented during the mandate, in a time when the loss of Alexandretta to Turkey, unrest in the eastern provinces, and the increasingly dire situation in Palestine shook the nation to its core.

In these challenging times, the school functioned as a primary venue for creating gendered citizens loyal to national and societal order. Upon assuming his post as Minister of Education and Justice on January 1, 1937, Dr. Abd al-Rahman al-Kayyali delivered a speech that further clarified these goals. Al-Kayyali’s words captured the departure from the past which many politicians seemed to emphasize in the wake of the new constitution: he claimed that the nation had reached “a new stage differing from the past stages completely.” As a result, the nation required new men. The school would

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3 Thompson, Colonial Citizens, 193.
4 Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 467.
5 Al-Qabas, “Kayfa yastaqbil wazir al-ma’arif ‘ahdahu; Ayuha al-tullab watanukum min lahmikum wa dammikum,” 1 January, 1937, 1.
satisfy this need, functioning as “a national factory (mu‘amal waṭanī)” which would produce “future men in the broadest sense of manliness.” The creation of manly men capable of defending the nation possessed a distinctly corporeal aspect. Al-Kayyali explained that the student must realize that “the nation (waṭan) is from his flesh and his blood.” The connection between nation and body was not simply rhetorical, either. For al-Kayyali the new nation required, quite literally, strong bodies. In this inaugural speech as minister of education, al-Kayyali called for physical education alongside book-learning. “Strength of bodies and strength of minds and strength of hearts; this is the goal of the school after today,” he declared.⁶

The promotion of physical education was not simply a top-down affair; students themselves supported physical education and training in the name of the nation.⁷ A March 10, 1937 letter written by students of the Tajhiz in Hama articulated sentiments very similar to al-Kayyali.⁸ The letter detailed how an athletic club had been established in Hama in 1929 by “cultured youth” who hoped to practice athletics. The French authorities had closed the club in 1933, however.⁹ The authors of the letter feared that the sporting spirit in Hama which had once been “strong and active” was “on the brink of going out” because of the absence of physical education in the high school or athletic

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⁶ In *Nurturing the Nation*, Lisa Pollard argues that in response to the British tendency to measure modernity based on “the domestic and marital habits of the Egyptian governing elite,” the Egyptian middle class also “came to define national character in terms of domestic behavior.” In the process, many male nationalists “exalted themselves in behavior that can readily be referred to as ‘maternal.’” The linkage between French colonial discourse and Syrian nationalist rhetoric warrants investigation here as well, although there appears to be a significant difference between Egypt and Syria. Whereas in Egypt men acted maternally in an effort to prove their capacity for self-rule, the Syrian government attempted to create more manly men capable of self-rule. Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: the Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805-1923* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 2,3.

⁷ Wilson Jacob refers to the government efforts to promote physical education in Egypt as the “the institutionalization of youthful energy.” Jacob, “Working out Egypt,” 164.


⁹ The reasons for the closing are unclear.
clubs in the city in general. The students concluded the letter by calling for a government-appointed physical education teacher for the school or the permission to establish a sports club in the city. The students made both claims in light of their presence in the “new age which demands from its youth to be healthy of constitution and strong of bodies.” Both students and administrators agreed that a new age had arrived that required physically fit youth.

As secondary school students requested more attention to physical education from the Ministry of Education, the government attempted to promote strong bodies in other ways as well. A March 1937 directive from the Ministry of Education attested to the unprecedented level of significance which scouting achieved in the latter half of the 1930s. Al-Kayyali began his memo by citing the benefits of scouting, which he identified as “preparing the youth of the nation (al-umma) for their greatest duty with regard to refinement of morals and strengthening of the body.” In an effort to promote these outcomes, al-Kayyali demanded “from school directors and their teachers encouragement of the scouting movement and prodding students to adopt these concepts and volunteer in the troops,” which were established in government schools.

The establishment of scouting troops in schools revealed the implication of class in scouting movements. Shortly after al-Kayyali’s directive, school officials in Aleppo raised an objection. Ever since the government made scouting “compulsory” in the school system, these officials noted that the measure failed to “take into account the means of the poor student” who could not afford “scouting clothes” due to “the poverty

of his father.”

Therefore, the director of education in Aleppo issued a memo noting “the necessity of being obliging with poor students.” Additionally, the local officials called for the ministry of education to lift the word “compulsory” from the directive with respect to scouting in schools because, they stated, “It is not reasonable to ban a student from following his lessons if his father is poor and from another perspective if he did not wish to join the scouts.” In his brief discussion of scouting in Aleppo, Watenpaugh also notes the class orientation of scouting troops, describing the use of different uniforms for different levels of education. What the evidence here suggests is that in addition to differentiating between classes, scouting in some cases interfered with the ability of poor Syrians to pursue educational advancement.

While events in Aleppo demonstrated that some teachers resisted the orders of the Ministry of Education with respect to physical education, a report by the Teachers League on education reform in Syria revealed an appreciation for scouting and physical activity. The report clearly demonstrated both the gendered nature of these measures as well as an awareness of developments in international education. “All of the teaching programs in the world are concerned with bodily athletics and the scouting movement especially because it creates healthy youth of healthy bodies and strong muscles,” the teachers claimed. According to the Teachers League, the rest of the world had also realized that scouting helped create a “feeling of manliness and chivalry (rujūla wa al-fituwa)” among its participants. By failing to establish similar programs and, instead, focusing on “drawing and music and calligraphy” in schools, Syria had apparently

12 Watenpaugh, Being Modern in the Middle East, 261.
created a generation of “youth…emaciated of bodies and weak and effeminate (mutakhanithīn) of constitution.”

To remedy the shortcoming, the report’s authors called for the establishment of athletic leagues among Syrian high schools with the oversight of physical education specialists. By institutionalizing athletics and scouting, teachers hoped to create manly men. Given the class dimensions of scouting in schools, it is clear that a certain kind of men – that is those of the middle or upper class – were the aim of this body-building project.

Public pronouncements by the government in support of scouting also revealed concern for international developments. On March 31, 1937 at 9:20 a.m. at the Damascus Tajhiz, Minister of Education al-Kayyali addressed a crowd of students gathered as part of a general scouting conference. He began his speech: “In the name of the fatherland and in the name of knowledge and in the name of scouting (bism al-waṭan wa bism al-‘ilm wa bism al-kashafiyya).” In the course of his address, he discussed some of the ways of achieving progress and civilization, stressing the need to “follow the best nations (umam)” in this regard. Whereas the Teachers League report revealed a general concern for international developments, al-Kayyali more specifically pinpointed beacons of progress, mentioning “Japan, China, America, and the entire East” as exemplary countries with respect to their support of scouting. Al-Kayyali concluded by invoking

14 An Arabic term for intersex (khuntha) comes from the same root as mutakhkhanith. In “Being Different: Intersexuality, Blindness, Deafness, and Madness in Ottoman Syria,” Scalenghe concludes that “neither the vocabulary for nor the concept of a ‘normal’ body or a ‘normal’ person had any currency in Ottoman Syria.” Additionally, she states that “no rigidly demarcated, impermeable boundary between the sexes existed in the early modern Bilad al-Sham.” This reading of Al-Qabas suggests that by the 1930s, a certain discourse presented Syrian male youth as not only abnormal but, moreover, abnormal on the basis of transgressing gender identities. Sara Scalenghe, “Being Different: Intersexuality, Blindness, Deafness, and Madness in Ottoman Syria” (Ph.D Dissertation, Georgetown University, 2006), 260, 103.

one of the strongest motivations for establishing scouting in the country. “March forth,” he exhorted the audience, “and we have great hope that in the coming years scouting will be the first kernel of the Syrian army.”

Leaders of the scouting movement echoed al-Kayyali with respect to both the relationship between scouting and a future army as well as the employment of rhetoric which substituted the nation for religion. In a May 18, 1937 parade of scouting troops in Damascus, the general representative of the Syrian Scouts, Dr Rushdi al-Jabi, addressed the vast crowd. Like other physical-activity advocates of the time, he emphasized the toughness which scouting engendered among participants, claiming that the endurance of “the roughness (akhshīshan) of life” prepared scouts “for carrying the greatest burden in the army.” He warned the scouts to not expect “rose water” beside “the roads of freedom and independence…but rather thistles.” By encountering figurative and literal thistles through scouting, the youth of the nation learned the “ruggedness of life” which would enable them to enter the “paradise of freedom and independence.”

Al-Jabi’s words offered a distinct solution to the fears of elite softness that people ranging from Halawa to the denizens of the Village Recovery Program communicated. For al-Jabi, however, reaching this heavenly state of independence did not solely depend on toughness. In

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16 A Syrian army was not established until after World War II. The French insistence on maintaining military control proved particularly volatile in the latter years of the conflict, when the security and military portfolios were the only realms in which the colonial power was unwilling to defer to the national government. Youssef Chaitani, Post-Colonial Syria and Lebanon: the Decline of Arab Nationalism and the Triumph of the State (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 24.


18 The promotion of “the rough life” manifested itself in the Zionist movement, too: various movements emerged in the early twentieth century that “trained Jewish youth for life on the farm and instilled in both boys and girls the commitment to personal fulfillment of the national goal, including the sacrifice of the material comforts of home for the sake of rebuilding the homeland, and the Zionist ideals of heroism, love of the land and physical labor.” Mayer, “From Zero to Hero: Masculinity in Jewish Nationalism,” 289.
addition, the journey required ordered knowledge as well. He implored the scouts to scientifically determine what Syria needed for its renaissance and then write a book “in the water of warm tears or…in red blood and grant this holy text its holiness just as the Muslim holds sacred the Qur’an and just as the Christian holds sacred the Bible and the Jew the Torah.” Following these instructions would enable the scouts to reach “the holy national paradise (al-jinna al-waṭaniyya al-muqaddasa).” Interestingly, both al-Kayyali and al-Jabi deployed a religious discourse in framing their conceptions of national duty. At the same time, they both viewed scientific knowledge as an essential counterpart to physical toughness.

The Iraqi government’s promotion of manliness through patronage of scouting predated and closely resembled the Syrian reforms. According to a late November 1935 article published in Al-Qabas, the Iraqi government established an “Order of the Futuwwa.” The goals of the initiative included bringing young men back to the “roughness (khushūna) of life;” “protection of manliness;” and instilling a “love of order” and sense of “loyalty.” The main component of the plan appeared to be a summer camp in the mountains for the boys run by officers who would provide military training. In addition to corporeal training, the camp included an educational component, in which the students would learn “military terminology and simple information about the history of

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19 With respect to the relationship between religion and secular nationalism in Syria, Gelvin writes, “While the state-building cards were clearly stacked in favor of their secular nationalist rivals for a number of reasons (not the least of which were the very terms of the covenant that sanctioned the mandates system), the activism of Islamic political associations in Syria compelled nationalist elites to reach a strained modus vivendi with their Islamic competitors, the ramifications of which lasted well beyond the mandate period.” The continued encounter of these entities (if they can even be treated as discrete) prevented, in Gelvin’s words, “a simple duplication of the public/private, religious/secular boundaries found in Western states.” James Gelvin, “Secularism and Religion in the Arab Middle East,” in The Invention of Religion: Rethinking Belief in Politics and History, eds. Derek Peterson and Darren Walhof (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 126-127.

the Iraqi War.” Like the scouting troops of Syria, too, the Iraqi youth programming included an expeditionary element, in which the young men would visit “different parts of Iraq” to see “historical remains” and the current “economic and architectural awakening (nahḍa).” With frequent cross-border traffic in addition to press coverage of cross-border developments, the Iraqi propagation of these policies represented an important part of the regional context from which the Syrian measures emerged.

Throughout the summer of 1937, the scouts of Syria held numerous spectacular parades which clearly attempted to project an image of national unity for the public eye. One such event occurred in the coastal town of Latakia in late June.21 Residents of the city began to gather at 9 a.m. at the Shanata coffeehouse and the square in front of it. A reporter from Al-Qabas estimated the crowd to be in the thousands. The school scouting troops then began to arrange themselves in lines. The national anthem played. Several speakers addressed the crowd and the amassed scouts. Professor Jawad al-Murabat, chief of the mayor’s office of Latakia, spoke at length about the symbolism of the scouts. He warned them, “It is necessary to not believe in your heads when you are carrying flags that you have become a party or a sect or a school or anything different from the group of the nation (umma).” Al-Murabat’s words possessed particular weight in Latakia, where French patronage of the Alawite and Christian minorities had especially threatened to fracture Syria into minority states.22 The proximity of Latakia to the sanjaq of Alexandretta, which the French ceded to Turkey from Syria in 1939, no doubt also played

22 In addition to countering divide-and-rule colonial tactics, the marches of scouts as a unified body also contrasted with other forms of public processions, which were organized based on quarters. Discussing the “traditional parades held in the quarters to celebrate religious events,” Khoury notes that “these occasions allowed the youth of one quarter to compete with the youth of neighboring quarters.” Khoury, Syria and the French Mandate, 305.
a part in presenting this message of unity. According to the Al-Qabas reporter, spectators certainly appreciated the unity of the scouts. The masses responded to the scouts’ “excellent organization and exact attire and coordinated movements” with “warmth and enthusiasm,” delighted with the display of “cultured patriotism (al-waṭaniyya al-muthaqafa) and glowing Arab spirit (al-rūḥ al-‘arabiyya al-mutawaqqida).”

At one such gathering of scouts, a speaker articulated the now familiar message of a connection between physical activity, government support of it, and civilizational advancement. In late August 1937, school scouting troops from all across Syria converged in the area of Bloudan for a week of camping, parades, and speeches. One of the lectures was by a man known as Mr. al-Sayyid. Al-Sayyid explicitly connected national political glory with athletic prowess. Somewhat like the Teachers League report on scouting in schools, al-Sayyid also believed that Syria had fallen behind other countries, which had “made sports compulsory in their schools and established [athletics] ministries no less in importance than the remainder of different ministries.” By making reforms in these measures, Syria could improve its athletic program in sports like boxing and football. Even as the nationalist government more energetically promoted physical activity, al-Sayyid’s words underscored advocacy for even broader government involvement.

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23 Al-Qabas, “Al-‘aql al-salim fi al-jism al-salim: muhadarat misr al-sayyid fi al-muhkhayam al-tadribi,” 26 August 1937, 3, 6. Gatherings such as the one in Bloudan probably had a productive impact on the participants’ national sentiments by providing a setting to socialize with other members of the nation from distant places. On the role of scouting gatherings in producing national identities in Palestine, Betty Anderson writes that “just as schools were doing, scout troops physically removed the boys from their village and urban settings and showed them the breadth and extent of the nation they claimed as their own.” Betty Anderson, Nationalist Voices in Jordan: the Street and the State (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005), 103.

24 Jacob writes of the Egyptian context: “That the press continued to pressure the government to increase support for sports in schools and in clubs throughout the period and into the 1930s and 1940s suggests that
figured prominently in these calls. After all, he argued, “in these games are many noble benefits and aims since they raise the name of the country and gain for it fame among nations (umam).” For al-Sayyid, athletics represented an opportunity for the newly independent nation to assert its place among other nations. His words departed significantly from the association of athletic progress with local political entities in the early 1930s. Al-Sayyid’s concern was not the city but the nation. His concluding remarks underscored how the geo-political needs of the nation – as part of a world community of nations – mapped themselves onto male bodies: “To work you young people to strengthen your bodies so as to participate in the athletic plans and to fight your counterparts from the lively nations (umam) for the nation (waṭan) calls to you oh men of the future!”

A number of football matches with other Arab teams earlier in the summer also demonstrated the tendency to conceive of national progress and modernity based on athletic success. Following an early June match between the Damascene Bardi club and Haifa’s Arab Union side, the mayor of Damascus, Tawfiq al-Khiyani, who attended the contest, wrote a letter thanking the Bardi players “who raised the name of Syria high thanks to this game which they participate in from time to time with different athletic

the state was never seen to be doing enough for the institution of al-riyada as a fundamental tool for the molding of Egyptian bodies to a modern world.” Jacob, “Working Out Egypt,” 170.

25 Lopez makes a similar point in his examination of Egyptian football, arguing that “for Egyptian officials, sports journalists, and the reading public of the 1920s, Olympic competition represented an important opportunity to reclaim Egypt’s place among the great civilizations of the world.” Lopez, “Football as National Allegory,” 284.

26 While international competitions might have presented the nation as unified in this context, Joseph Massad has shown how athletic competitions within Jordan in the 1980s demonstrated fractures in national identity: “Supporting the Wihdat or the Ramtha team became a national act of loyalty to one’s Palestianniess or Jordianness, respectively.” Joseph Massad, Colonial Effects: the Making of National Identity in Jordan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 256.
clubs in brotherly Arab nations.”  The attempt to secure international appreciation through sporting achievement manifested itself in many places. In Italy, for example, the 1934 World Cup was “seen as an opportunity for the regime to demonstrate its ardour, achievements and creative potential to Italians and the rest of the world.” Martin, *Football and Fascism*, 183.


30 The article suggests that the Damascus crowd supported Bardi club. In addition to presenting an image of the national success in the international sphere, common encouragement for local athletic teams was another realm for displaying the nation. In 1930s Italian football, Martin refers to the “passionate and united support” for the Italian national team as “yet another metaphor for the nation that was being brought together by Fascism.” Martin, *Football and Fascism*, 188. In some cases, however, political leanings have prompted the home crowd to root against the home team. Massad claims that in a 1968 match between the Egyptian and Jordanian national teams in Amman, “most of the Jordanian youth in the country, who were Arab nationalists, rooted for the Egyptian team. There were only a minority of Jordanian nationalists who rooted for Jordan’s team.” Massad, *Colonial Effects*, 255.
stipulates that we consider Bardi club the loser in this battle but this law does not stop us from saying that Bardi made clear rare skill in its play.” After all, the author reasoned, the Egyptian side had no less than seven international players and had competed in the most recent Olympics. Despite the result, Bardi required support, as it was the only club which could ensure for Syria “an athletic future it and its reputation is worthy of.” In closing, the author returned to the idea of Syria deserving a place among other nations. Athletic success, undergirded by exercising individual bodies, represented a key path toward achieving that glory. On the eve of World War II, the nationalists had secured power. As the result of Bardi’s match with the representative of the consummate site of Arab progress demonstrated, they had perhaps not yet achieved the national reawakening they envisioned as Syria’s destiny. But they had captured national bodies through government policies informed by a logic which linked physical fitness and national standing.
CONCLUSION

To begin this thesis, I recounted a newspaper article that praised local societal order as the measure of an internationally-mandated modernity rooted in the nation-state system. Throughout this account, I have attempted to show how this vision of order was represented and performed in physical culture, increasingly bringing the connection between the nation and middle- and upper-class male bodies under the purview of the state.

The first chapter looked at the ways in which athletic contests developed as mass spectator events that shifted from being represented as local to national performances, underpinned by a clear logic of class hierarchy. As the progress of the independence effort stagnated in the early 1930s, matches between the Damascene clubs of Mu‘awiyya and Bardi and regional clubs hailing from Beirut, Cairo, and Palestine provided occasions for debating levels of modernity and notions of progress in different geographic areas. Often Egypt occupied a place of honor within these debates, often as a result of its possession of the accoutrements of modern nation-statehood, among them participation in international athletic competitions like the Olympics and the World Cup. But Damascus found a place at the table, too. Sports reports reveled in the praise Egyptian or Beiruti observers put forward for Damascus. Notably, these comparisons took place on the level of cities rather than nations. The notion of Syria as a continuous geographic unit did not present itself in the Al-Qabas discussions of football in the early 1930s. As club athletic competitions attracted the interest of a broad swath of society and enabled comparisons of levels of modernity, the establishment of scholastic athletic leagues and competitions underscored the situation of athletics within a middle- and upper-class social milieu.
Meanwhile, on the margins of these organized athletic contests, writers and thinkers began to connect the athletic physicality of young men with a capacity to resist French mandate authorities. More generally, writers asserted a connection between the sporting virility of young men and national well-being. As the years passed, writers presented physical activity in an increasingly national light. Whereas in the early 1930s Al-Qabas editorials somewhat vaguely noted the theoretical connection between physical fitness and geo-political power, public officials unequivocally articulated this connection in the Syrian context at athletic contests in the summer of 1935. Notions of social order accompanied the transformation of athletics into national performances. By the mid-1930s, sports appeared to remain the realm of the educated. But the increasing public interest in competitions also added another dimension to the performance: an audience from numerous social classes. Symbolically, then, middle- and upper-class young men performed the nation; everyone else watched. Yet the crowd did not always prove as docile as national elites might have hoped. At times – such as in the case of the Syrian boxer Mustafa al-Arna’ut’s pummeling of the Armenian fighter Kalus Tarzian – the crowd itself erupted into a bout of fighting and disorder, which writers attempted to quell by calling upon the virtue of sportsmanship. Even as middle and upper-class urban males attempted to direct these performances of national progress, their control of the situation remained tenuous.

The second chapter further discussed the class implications of national physical activity as it manifested itself in the scouting movement’s nation-making endeavors. Emerging as part of a decidedly global youth movement and in the context of the National Bloc’s attempt to re-package itself as opposed to the French mandate
authorities, several scouting movements formed in Damascus. Though these movements denied having any political motive, they nevertheless engaged in a deeply political effort of instilling national sentiments in middle- and upper-class young men through, among other activities, cross-country camping expeditions and organized marches in cities. The leaders of these troops also made clear the socioeconomic profile of those whom they targeted for membership. Whether in referring to the necessity of attracting educated youth to the movement or in commending scouts for eschewing their patrician origins to perform plebeian tasks, the scouting movement clearly brought the bodies of bourgeois and elites into the realm of the nation through physical exertion. Much like athletic contests at this time, the scouting movement engaged in physically active performances of the nation underwritten by a clearly hierarchical sense of social order that presented nation-making as the realm of bourgeois and upper-class young men.

The third chapter followed the biographies of a few athletes, illuminating both the lived experience of sportsmen and the effort to conceptualize physical culture as an authentic cultural practice. Sa’ib Bey al-‘Azm, Mahmud al-Bahrah, and ‘Az al-Din al-Saman all developed their interests in athletics while in Damascus schools, underscoring a probable social background in the Damascene middle or upper classes. Yet the athletes found the sporting environment in Syria barren and so they traveled abroad to slake their thirst for athletic instruction. Though they all eventually returned to their homeland, they struggled to maintain their athletic forms. Moreover, despite their hopes of establishing training institutions like those they encountered abroad, the men generally failed. Their trajectory of departure and return underscored a number of other themes brought up in the first chapter, namely the development of sports as mass spectator events and the
understanding of modernity as existing outside of Syria. But the clearest point of the series dealt with the government. Emphasizing the failures and disappointments of the Syrian athletes, the authors of the articles demanded that the government support athletics more comprehensively. The athletes’ reliance on foreign expertise did not by any means undermine their status as Syrians. Rather, the fact of their reliance prompted writers to criticize the state and call for more energetic intervention into bodily affairs. While the biographies revealed no xenophobic critiques against these men, there also seemed to be a clear attempt to carve out an authentic space for physical activity within Arab culture more broadly. By emphasizing the physical prowess of Islamic and jahiliyya era heroes, al-Halwani provided authentic exemplars of a physically powerful Arab antiquity. While the authors of the series on contemporary champions lamented government intransigence toward athletics, al-Halwani more clearly faulted individual citizens for failing to care for their bodies. In both cases, however, the physical fitness of Syrian men represented a matter of concern, underscored by its connection to the well-being of the nation.

The fourth chapter shifted from urban athletic contests to examine the Village Recovery Program, which demonstrated both the importance of regional political developments and the continued bourgeois effort to exert power in the realm of bodily reform. From its inception at AUB, the concept of the Village Recovery Program presented the peasant as the pillar (if perhaps a cracked one) of Arab society. Having fallen into physical deterioration as a result of the negligence of both the government and the urban bourgeois, the students of AUB nevertheless believed the peasant required the guidance of urban elites for survival. They proposed to remedy the situation by establishing aid camps in rural areas to dispense hygienic, medical, and agricultural
advice to the peasant. Like scout leaders, the purveyors of the Village Recovery Program described their project in apolitical terms, potentially obscuring their participation in the nation-making project with respect to both the establishment of public health norms and the notion of general service in the name of a national community. A very similar program emerged in Iraq in the mid-1930s as well, in which the scouting movement hoped to provide enlightened expertise to the forsaken peasant. With considerable press coverage of both initiatives in *Al-Qabas*, the cultured youth of Damascus finally took up the issue themselves, adopting the same hierarchical notion of aid coming from the elites to the peasants to support their bodily health. The Syrian government implemented the project on a wider scale in 1938, essentially nationalizing the community service idea – and its hegemonic class implications of the bourgeois and elites saving peasants – of a few AUB students in the early 1930s.

The final chapter detailed the nexus of the various forms of and ideas about physical culture under the nationalist government, which brought the notions of gender and class followed throughout this account into the offices of the state. Though the National Bloc attained an unprecedented level of control of national policy with its accession to power in 1937, it still remained beset by threats, most urgently in Alexandretta. Physical culture was one place the group attempted to fortify the nation against these dangers. In schools, physical education curricula aimed to produce the strong men that the new nation needed in this perilous age. In addition to the government, students and teachers, too, demanded these services as means to make the nation stronger. The loosely affiliated scouting movement also came under government control, as the state established troops within schools. Protests from Aleppo over the
inability of some students to afford scouting uniforms underscored that many of these forms of physical culture appropriated by the state retained their middle- and upper-class serving nature. In addition to some of these structural aspects of physical culture and the government’s promotion of it, scouting and sport remained important spheres for performing the nation. The tight, orderly lines of the scouting march evoked the orderliness of the entire nation. Results on the soccer pitch evinced national glories or deficiencies as opposed to the results of events in the early 1930s, which underscored city-based comparisons of progress. In each of these scenes of the national drama, fit male bodies formed the show’s cast.

Through these physical activities, nationalist elites struggling under colonial rule imagined a way to assert a place within a global nation-state order while maintaining their own power in a domestic social order. On one level, these dynamics were embedded in the discursive framing of articles in Al-Qabas and circulated to a broader public, read in solitude in the office or read collectively in the coffeehouse. On another level, these activities were practices, performed in front of cheering crowds and spectators craning their necks for a look at the young men who were said to represent the nation. In both of these forms of dissemination, physical activity of primarily middle- and upper-class men became a crucial aspect of everyday manifestations of nationalism.

In tracing the development of what might be referred to as a mentality, I have contextualized these manifestations of the nation in everyday politics in the broader political context of the National Bloc’s activities. In History and Social Theory, Peter Burke rightly notes that “historians have proved much more successful at describing mentalities at a particular point in the past than at explaining how, when or why they
I hope that in some ways my examination has brought the mentality of physical culture to light. As I suggested in the introduction, the practices connecting male bodies to the nation receives little attention in work on Syria and the Arab world in general. But I also have shown that this mentality was a response to a variety of challenges to elite power. Moreover, I have demonstrated how this way of thinking and acting appealed to a much broader swath of society than simply the denizens of the National Bloc. Although I have stressed how physical fitness activities whether in the scouting camp or on the football pitch generally remained the sphere of educated middle- and upper-class urban men, the final chapter demonstrates that a number of actors evidently accepted these ideas. Teachers, students, and the government alike had imbibed of this notion of a link between a strong bourgeois male body and the nation. The degree of hegemony that this bodybuilding project achieved was not inevitable. However, it was mandatory, in that it was a distinct by-product of the power dynamics of the mandate period.

Over the past decade, scholars have attempted to write various marginalized groups into the history of nationalism in Syria. From Gelvin with the popular classes to Thompson with women and workers to Provence with rural rebels to Watenpaugh with the middle class, all of these authors utilize innovative approaches as they shift away from a focus on male urban elites. In comparison to this trend, my focus on that very group in this thesis probably appears somewhat curious; it even feels slightly

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2 Khoury notes a paradox in this effort: in attempting to include previously excluded voices in the history of nationalism, the authors “are also nonetheless validating the centrality of nationalism as established by the elites. Being nationalist, or not, is still the measure of agency.” Khoury, “The Paradoxical in Arab Nationalism: Interwar Syria Revisited,” in *Rethinking Nationalism in the Arab Middle East*, eds. James Jankowski and Israel Gershoni (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 274.
uncomfortable. Yet the emphasis is important. The aforementioned scholars rightly seek to move beyond a simple account of nationalism as an intellectual fashion adopted from Europe by male political elites. But in moving beyond this historiographical tendency, the authors also leave behind historical actors. In applying somewhat novel historiographical methodologies by utilizing gender as an analytical tool and focusing on physical culture as a set of practices through which to view complex politics, I have shown how rather than spending the 1930s merely ossified in political negotiations, the National Bloc was a dynamic member of the mandate political habitat. Responding to both global and local conditions, the Bloc disseminated ideas and practices that linked male physical fitness with national well-being, inscribing the nation into parts of the body politic in new and numerous ways. These notions of modernity came from Europe to an extent, but they also came translated via Cairo, Baghdad, and Beirut. The borrowings and interactions spawned a wide variety of nation-making practices of the every-day. Moreover, the National Bloc held governmental political power. As a result, they institutionalized many of the ideas about the connection between the nation and the male body propagated throughout the 1930s.

Finally and most importantly, the various performances of physical culture delimited the nation as a community for a broader public. While gatherings at the football stadium or the scouting camp were not political in the sense that the attendees supported a certain politician or party, they were deeply political in constructing a proto-nationalist public sphere, connecting individuals to both the nation and the state. This point fits with broader historiographical debates. Khoury observes that “the study of interwar Arab nationalism has long faced a fundamental paradox. The nationalist elite was remarkably
small at the beginning of the period and not much bigger at its end.”

3 How, then, to explain the mass political movements of the 1940s and 1950s? The beginnings of the story lie in the development of a bourgeois model of male citizenship that linked the existence of a hierarchical social order domestically with membership in a global community of nation-states.

3 Khoury, “The Paradoxical in Arab Nationalism,” 275.
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