

# Sport and Politics in Palestine, 1918–48: Football as a Mirror Reflecting the Relations between Jews and Britons

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The period reviewed in this article (1918–48) is divided into different sub-periods, each characterized by changes relating to the political reality in the Palestine and a specific set of sporting relations that grew out of these broader circumstances. It is argued that football in Palestine constituted a kind of mirror, or a litmus test, for diagnosing the psychological climate of Jewish and British relations: in times of security and rest normal friction between players in the football pitch did not turn into violent confrontations, the implications of which went beyond the boundaries of stadiums. Conversely, in the years when the political and military arena in the region was particularly conflictual, the delicate balance of relations between sportsmen and sports fans on both sides was threatened.

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As a dominant world power in the middle of the nineteenth century, Britain considered it of utmost importance to secure its empire not merely through direct military and political power, but also through the transfer of its cultural systems. Sports, which gained popularity throughout the nineteenth century, served as an important vehicle for the transmission of British culture. Besides contributing to the development of educational values like order, discipline and obedience, the British system of sports also fulfilled the important function of representing Britain and its social system to the rest of the world. British sports were spread around the globe by British merchants, missionaries and students who were unwilling to accept or participate in non-British forms of physical education and sport. The dominance of British sports over 'foreign' systems of physical activity (e.g. the German *Turnen* movement) was based on the self-conviction of national superiority and on the fact that the newly introduced sports were welded to British taste. This attitude of superiority reached its peak towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, nations that were part of, or were touched by, the British Empire were also influenced by the British approach to sports in different ways.<sup>1</sup> The achievements of sportsmen of national entities lacking formal sovereignty and of young states in the international arena may evoke pride and patriotism, enhance the sense of separateness of the political unit from other countries and accelerate the internal process of integration. These countries, usually missing political, military and economic power, emphasize the acquisition

of symbolic power as a substitute. In this respect, sport as such can impart an illusion of equality between countries characterized by various levels of development.

This article examines the place of football in the political history of the Jewish community in Palestine under British rule, from 1918 to 1948. The British Army's control of Palestine in the First World War and its conquest from the Ottoman Turkish Empire continued from autumn 1917 to the autumn of 1918. In November 1917, the British Foreign Minister, Arthur James Balfour, announced that His Majesty's Government viewed with favour the establishment of a national home for the Jewish people in the land of Israel. This declaration, the result of Britain's desire to strengthen its position in the Middle East, combined with feverish Zionist activism, laid the foundation for the creation of a political framework within which the national aspirations of Jews could be realized. In July 1920, the military government of the conquered area was replaced with civilian rule that managed the affairs of Palestine until May 1948, when the state of Israel declared its independence. In July 1922, Britain received the official mandate for the country from the League of Nations.

The arrival in Palestine of the first High Commissioner, Herbert Samuel (1920–25), created the right conditions for the development of an efficient and organized government and for the crystallization of a self-ruled Jewish society. During this period the representative institutions of the *Yishuv* (the Jewish settlement in Palestine) gained official recognition; the flow of immigrants to Palestine, mainly from eastern Europe, increased; the purchase of land for agricultural settlement was expedited; the economic infrastructure was broadened; and Hebrew, alongside English and Arabic, was recognized as an official language. The new immigrants were unfettered by the many obstacles arising from the existence of long-standing, rigid local traditions. The majority of the Jewish population of Palestine came from a European cultural background, even if not from the more advanced countries of that continent. The continual development of the political, cultural and economic institutions of the Jewish community mirrored its inclination to autarky in all walks of life. The Mandate government, as a typical *laissez-faire* government, mainly provided the necessary services to the population and did not force upon it the status symbols of the British colonial elite. On their part, the Mandate authorities were assisted by the cooperation and desire of the *Yishuv's* institutions to achieve international legitimacy for British rule in Palestine. In this aspect, the Jewish community of Palestine was sharply in contrast to other British colonies.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, the first years of the Mandate foretold the future triangle of relations between the Jews, the Arabs and the British. The reigning hope of the Zionist movement, that Britain would ensure active aid to the *Yishuv* in establishing a demographic majority of the Jews on the basis of a flourishing economy and political autonomy, encountered not only strong antagonism and violent outbreaks from the Arabs of Palestine, but also the setting of limits on immigration and

settlement at the initiative of the government in London. From now on British policy was characterized by the aspiration to establish a framework of coexistence between Arabs and Jews and of bridging the contrasting ideologies without undermining the British political stance in the Middle East. The efforts of the Zionist movement and the *Yishuv* to ensure the constant and proper development of the national home, and the Arab efforts to prevent the Zionist target from materializing, occurred throughout the entire period of the Mandate rule.

There is a strong link between the broader structure of (political) relations in the area and the way in which the Hebrew sport movement developed in Palestine. As a rule, the activities of Jewish sports organizations, which took their first steps during the First World War, were not disturbed by the British, and were carried out freely and independently. There is also no evidence that the Mandate authorities tried to enforce any specific fields of sport on the local population. Moreover, by the second half of the 1920s, sport became a means of national representation for the Jewish society. The aspiration of breaking out of the framework of the Palestinian Mandate, while at the same time continually striving to advertise the achievements of the Jewish national home and to stress its ties to diaspora Jewry, aroused the enthusiasm of local sportsmen to compete with their colleagues in the Middle East and Europe. The Palestinian Jews' international sporting ties expanded, and the numbers of meetings with sportsmen from abroad increased.<sup>3</sup>

For the purposes of this article, of particular importance were the meetings between Jews and the British in the field of sport, especially football. Although the vast majority of the leaders of the *Yishuv* did not see British rule in Palestine as an occupying and illegitimate force, at least until the end of the Second World War, it must be noted that on both sides there were representatives of the population who aspired to independence and, on the other hand, representatives of the government that in certain fields and at certain periods wanted to advance the development of the Jewish national home while at other times seeking to limit it. This paper essentially attempts to examine whether and how the political reality was mirrored on the football field, and what the external events were that influenced the desire to extend football ties between the sides, or alternatively to reduce them.

Chronologically, the period being surveyed can be divided into distinct sub-periods defined according to the character of political relations between the Jewish *Yishuv* and the British government in Palestine more broadly, and the influence of these relations on 'footballing' relations in particular. These periods are: 1918-30, from the military conquest of Palestine to the severe crisis in relations between the Jewish community and the Mandate government, when the latter adopted the policy of limiting immigration and Jewish settlement in Palestine for political and economic reasons; 1931-35, when with the public retreat of the London government from the said policy there was a relative calm in relations between the Jews and British; the years 1936-45, which include the Arab Revolt (1936-39),

during which the Palestinian Arabs conducted a violent battle against the Jewish population, and the Second World War (1939–45). During this period, the Palestinian Jews needed the Mandate authorities to ensure their security. The years 1945–48 form the period in which relations with the Mandatory authorities worsened and open conflict between the *Yishuv* and the British government over the political future of Palestine became evident. This period ended with the establishment of the independent state of Israel in May 1948.

### 1918–30: Between Cooperation and Violent Incidents on the Football Pitch

Even though football began to be played in Palestine before the First World War, the British occupation of the land gave tremendous momentum to the game's development. What small pieces of evidence exist regarding football games held in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and Jaffa, between Jews and Arabs and between Jews themselves before 1910, show that the local inhabitants played football under primitive conditions with the assistance of improvised equipment. A piece of uncultivated land, two rods serving as goalposts and some kind of a ball were all that was required to take pleasure from the sport which would capture the world in the years to come. Many of the first footballers were part of the Maccabi sports federation, which was founded in 1912.<sup>4</sup>

The war that broke out in August 1914 did not stop sporting activity in Palestine altogether and, in its first year, football get-together games took place between Jews and Turkish soldiers, although these seem to have been irregular.<sup>5</sup> The harder life in Palestine became, as a result of the involvement of Turkey in battles, the more leisure culture was pushed aside. The sports movement in the Jewish *Yishuv* was to renew its activity on a large scale only on completion of the British occupation.

The activities of the members of Maccabi in Palestine were renewed several months after the end of the First World War. Giving priority to competitive sport over gymnastics was one of the signs of British influence. Zvi Nishry, one of the outstanding physical educators of those years, states that 'at this time, various sports, especially the football game, were popular among the Jewish settlers, as a result of the British army's influence'.<sup>6</sup> From the early 1920s, football matches against British teams, whose players came from among military and police units, and later from government officialdom, became routine and attracted much public attention. The Jewish immigrant waves that came to Palestine from eastern Europe brought with them a number of outstanding and experienced football players who helped the game to become firmly established and introduced regular training for players.<sup>7</sup> The veterans of the Hebrew Jewish Battalions, who fought at the side of the British in the First World War and gained sporting skills during their military activity, joined these football players.<sup>8</sup> Josef Yekutieli, one of the most prominent founders of the new Jewish sport movement in Palestine, stated the following in 1927:

The development of the football game in the Land of Israel grew considerably in recent years. This fine game became very liked by the youth in the country and the number of football players belonging to all the populations in the country, Jews and Gentiles alike, reaches several thousands. Even the liking of our game by the public has been increased tremendously and the number of spectators which is doubled by the season proves this affection as well, turning football into a popular game.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, there were those who treated suspiciously, even with resentment, the growing popularity of this sport, which in their eyes represented a culture that stood in clear contradiction to traditional Jewish values, which emphasized the superiority of spiritual life. Soon a public debate erupted, where those who objected to football claimed that:

The English can afford this luxury: they neglect nothing. In between leaping and running they conquer countries, write books, draw visions, produce eternal creations; ... [yet] what is left for us other than that old weakness for national original culture and for those books which among their parchments we have found the secret of existence?<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, advocates of the sport maintained that 'The exercises in the open air, like other sports, capture an important role in the renewal of the nation ... the same youth, who learns nowadays to defend the goal, has to be trusted because it will be ready in time of need to defend its people's honour'.<sup>11</sup>

British sports clubs were established during these years – the outstanding ones in Jaffa and Jerusalem<sup>12</sup> – and contributed to the institutionalization of football matches by holding unofficial cup games. These games, organized by the Jerusalem Sport Club, commenced in 1922 and were under the absolute supremacy of the British teams. Most impressive of all was the 'Fliers' team of Ramla, which represented the British Royal Air Force in Palestine and won every competition staged up until 1928, when the cup was won, for the first time, by a Jewish team – Hapoel-Alenby Tel Aviv.<sup>13</sup>

Another sphere in which the positive influence of the spirit of sport in its British version was evident was the issue of establishing national sports institutions officially recognized by international sports bodies. In an attempt to guarantee the recognition of these bodies in sporting contests and projects attended by representatives of the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine, a few Maccabi activists sought in 1924 to affiliate their organization to the International Amateur Athletic Federation. This initiative ended in failure as Maccabi was not seen to represent Arab, British and Jewish sportsmen in Palestine equally.<sup>14</sup> However, this unsuccessful attempt did not discourage Josef Yekutieli, who, from the beginning of 1925 attempted to gain membership of the Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) for Maccabi. Yekutieli tried to do this by establishing the Palestine Football Federation, in which all the teams

active in the field would take a role, 'regardless of religion and race'. The federation's inaugural meeting gathered in the summer of 1928. At the end of that year it joined FIFA temporarily, and in the summer of 1929 the Palestine Football Federation was granted permanent status.<sup>15</sup>

The international orientation of the leaders of the Jewish Sports Movement in Palestine was expressed in their attempts to nurture sporting relations with sports bodies in neighbouring Arab countries – Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Trans-Jordan. An interesting episode which emphasizes the importance they attributed to the symbols of national uniqueness in the sport arena, as part of the ethos of a nation striving to achieve its independence, took place in 1930: a team of Palestine football players comprising six Jewish and nine British players toured Egypt. The team, which was named the 'Land of Israel Select Team' had the letter 'P' (short for 'Palestine') on its uniform, while 'LD' (the initials of the Hebrew name of Palestine – Land of Israel) was written in small letters. Due to this fact, as well as to the playing failure of the team in its three games, against the Cairo team (5–0), the Alexandria team (2–0) and a military team from Cairo (5–2), the trip was sharply criticized in the Hebrew press:

We highly regard the friendly relations between our country and the neighbouring countries; indeed, sport can produce such relations. Again, a team from the Land of Israel went to compete in Egypt. Their uniform is not blue and white but black and white and their symbol is not a Hebrew one but a big P and only small LD on its side ... the team had to comprise the inhabitants of the country – only the inhabitants of the country and not military people who travel here and there, and due to their temporary status in the land they cannot be representatives of the country.<sup>16</sup>

However, there was an even more distinctly negative side to the frequent sporting contact between Jews and Britons. Despite cooperation in organizing matches,<sup>17</sup> fights often erupted between players of both sides and fierce protests were expressed on the part of Jewish football players who perceived that British referees were discriminating against them.<sup>18</sup> A member of Maccabi, Josef Vilenchik, describes a 'very turbulent' football game held in Jerusalem in the first half of the 1920s between the Maccabi Tel Aviv team and one of the football teams of Mandate government officials. According to Vilenchik, he and his friends decided to retaliate in kind against the rough treatment handed out by the British players. Consequently, the number of physical injuries deliberately inflicted led to 'this wild game [that was] ended before it was due; although we have lost we have shown the English that we are not making concessions and that we have the power to give them what they deserve'.<sup>19</sup> National honour played a major role in the attitude of Jewish football players in matches against government representatives. These matches were perceived by the Jewish players as prestige contests par excellence. Yehoshua Aluf, another prominent member of Maccabi, describes a game held on a sandy playing field in Tel Aviv in which the

British team had the lead (4–3) up until the last minute of the game, when a player from the Jewish team equalized. As Aluf stated, this led to ‘a huge festival in all of Tel Aviv’.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, there were those on the Jewish side who insisted that games were played fairly and without violence. Colonel Frederick Herman Kisch, a well known activist in the Zionist movement in Palestine during the 1920s and early 1930s, as well as an honorary president of the Maccabi Sport Federation in Palestine in the years 1923–27, was required many times to address the issue of relations between the British and Jewish football teams and made an effort to appease the angry parties. Kisch did not hesitate to criticize the behaviour of Jewish players where necessary, and although he attributed some expressions of violence to ‘ignorance and inexperience’, he stressed by the same token that ‘out of desire to maintain our reputation, I shall advise the High Commissioner, the Chief Secretary and the Regional Governor not to be present in any of our games until such time when I shall again trust the behaviour of our teams and fans’.<sup>21</sup> Football-related incidents reached their climax following the publication of the ‘White Book’ in October 1930,<sup>22</sup> resulting in expressions of hostility by Jewish spectators towards British teams, and even in confrontations between Jewish and Arab fans. Consequently, the third high commissioner, John Chancellor (1928–31), ordered the suspension of matches between Hebrew teams and British military and police teams in November 1930.<sup>23</sup>

### 1931–35: The Jewish *Yishuv* Repents and Confesses its Guilt

In the sporting circles of the Jewish *Yishuv* in Palestine, the decision to abort football games between Jews and Britons was a major disappointment. At the beginning of 1931, the heads of the sports organizations addressed Colonel Kisch, the head of the political department of the Jewish Agency to the Land of Israel (the highest representative body of the Zionist movement) and asked him to intervene, ‘in order to revoke the above order which gravely hurts and insults us in the national and sporting sense’.<sup>24</sup> The British government’s public withdrawal from its previous policy (February 1931) gradually reduced the tension between the Jews and the British and helped to renew sports contests between the parties. Following the cutback in the British military forces in Palestine, initiated by the second high commissioner, Lord Plumer (1925–28), the reputation of British police sportsmen increased. In 1932 these sportsmen took part in the new football league which, subsequently, they won.<sup>25</sup> It is, however, unclear why the participation of British teams in league and cup matches was cut short during the first half of the decade. Only in 1938 did they make an attempt to reintegrate into official competitive football projects.<sup>26</sup>

In the middle of the 1930s, people in the *Yishuv* started to express regret. The daily newspaper *Ha'aretz* wrote:

The English teams in the Land of Israel gave an enormous drive to the development of the football in the country. These teams were in most cases mediocre and served as excellent training material. There were also single teams from which our players could learn a lot ... nonetheless the several quarrels between the English and the Hebrew in the cup games ended the games, and once our teams lost their chief opponents – the flabbiness and apathy bacteria stuck in them.<sup>27</sup>

A member of the Jewish sport organization Hapoel (founded in 1926), Meir Bnayahu, added:

Who is to blame for the ceasing of the sports relations between us and the English? As far as I am concerned I reckon ... that it is our fault. We did not know how to rise above petty considerations and control our nerves when push came to shove. ... The authorities looked favourably on these get-togethers and we benefited enormously.

Bnayahu sealed his assertion with frankness: 'All the means of assistance were of no avail, and to my mind will not be useful, as long as we shall not manage to renew the game with English teams in the Land of Israel.'<sup>28</sup> This change in attitude was mainly due to sporting motives; however this trend was strengthened by the increasingly violent political context.

### 1936–45: Rapprochement in the Sport for Political Reasons

The political reality in Palestine, which took a sharp turn in 1936, was the determining factor in the decision of the leaders of Jewish sports institutions to act vigorously in order to strengthen contacts with the British security forces. During this year the Arab population of the country started escalating their fighting tactics in protest against new immigration certificates issued by the Mandate government to Jews. In time the Arabs began hurting the Jewish *Yishuv* and British government institutions by more aggressive acts of resistance. Three years later, following waves of terror that came upon all parts of Palestine, the reinforced British army succeeded in subduing the Arab uprising.<sup>29</sup>

Since the outbreak of these events, an intensive effort was made in the Jewish *Yishuv* to hold sporting contests in football, swimming, water polo and hockey against the army units, in an attempt to bring British soldiers closer to the Zionist settlement in Palestine. 'The scope of interest of most army and navy personnel is limited to two: women and sport', Nachum Chet, one of the heads of Maccabi, maintained in a memorandum he wrote in September 1936. Chet concluded that 'The first field is not for us, therefore sport is in fact the only field where we could find a common language and ground between our youth and most of the army and navy'.<sup>30</sup> Chet wished to build good relations with the military because, in the face of the 'Arab Revolt', 'the life of the *Yishuv* and all its material property were

given to these forces for protection and defence'.<sup>31</sup> Chet suggested that sports competitions be initiated 'even in faraway locations, since the army is scattered over the country and the competitions with the soldiers who are bored in Zefat, Tzemach or in other settlements – from our general point of view – are more important than with those situated in the cities'.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, it was determined that the meetings would be one element of 'friendly parties' and made public, since the 'army and navy's sportsmen – like most sportsmen – are fond of publicity'.<sup>33</sup> The practical outcome of Chet's memo was the Jewish Agency's appointment of George Flash, also a member of Maccabi, to the position of 'coordinating and organizing the sports relations between the Hebrew sports organizations in the country and the British army which is situated in the Land of Israel'.<sup>34</sup>

The representatives of Hapoel joined a special committee that was appointed to arrange sporting relations with the British army – which it did with enthusiasm and some success.<sup>35</sup> In December 1937, two of the heads of the Palestine Football Federation reported that three matches with British military teams were held in the presence of 'spectators from among the officers and soldiers', and that 'after the games the soldiers and our players were treated in tea parties followed by a tour in Tel Aviv for the army groups'.<sup>36</sup> A farewell letter by one of the army units that completed its assignments in Palestine in November 1937 expressed appreciation for the kind hospitality which the sportsmen of the *Yishuv* provided. The unit commander, Major L.B. Green, wrote to the honorary secretary of the Maccabi Tel Aviv club: 'We thank you for your tolerance in respect of people who speak a different language. Our men felt relief when they could leave the barbed wires surrounding the camp and have a competition'.<sup>37</sup> This state of affairs stood in striking contrast to the absolute separation in sporting relations between the country's Jews and Arabs in those years. Journalist Shimon Samet pondered:

Perhaps at first a small group of Arab sportsmen would be found, a group that would listen to our voice and claims that sport and politics should not be mixed and that the good and mutual relationships between sportsmen of both nations could bring about the improvement of the friendship relations in general.<sup>38</sup>

Nothing, however, came of this proposal.

The tendency towards rapprochement with British army sportsmen continued through the Second World War. Palestine was quite far from the central fighting arena in Europe, even if between the spring of 1941 and the autumn of 1942 danger was imminent as a result of the advance of the German army in the Middle East. The threat of occupation felt in the Jewish *Yishuv* in the summer of 1942 was removed following the November success of the Allies in holding back the offensive of Rommel's African Corps at El Alamein, and subsequently driving it out of all its strongholds in North Africa. Palestine's position as a 'rear space' (i.e. not the frontline) in the Middle East throughout the

duration of the war made the *Yishuv*, in the words of the Israeli historian Yoav Gelber, 'a hosting society'. This society 'absorbed' 100,000 foreign soldiers who served in it on a permanent basis, in addition to the tens of thousands of other soldiers who temporarily trained, regrouped, rested and/or recuperated in the country. This great and diverse migrant population, from the national point of view, was subjected to attempts by the country's Jews to present the Zionist settlement in a positive light and demonstrate a sympathetic attitude towards the Allies.<sup>39</sup>

Sporting relations were perceived as an important mechanism for fulfilling these goals, as demonstrated in a memorandum issued by the Maccabi Federation in Palestine about six months after the war broke out:

Here it is, we are given the opportunity now that tens of thousands of British soldiers from various countries and classes happened to come to the country; some of which will play important roles in the British policy and it is up to us to influence them and make them our friends through friendly sport meetings; it is our duty to do so properly and on a full state scale.

Based on the precedent of the years before the war, Maccabi leaders even suggested that a special office next to the Jewish Agency be established, 'to hold games and competitions with the army'.<sup>40</sup> The political department of the Jewish Agency responded positively, declaring that 'there is a necessity in arranging and encouraging sports meetings between the army (especially the Australian army<sup>41</sup>) and the various sport organizations in the country'. It was further emphasized that contests were desirable in a wide range of sports besides football. After-match entertaining was also encouraged.<sup>42</sup>

The above recommendations were applied in practice by the two large sporting organizations throughout the years of the war. The sportsmen of Maccabi and Hapoel held competitions against soldiers from Britain, Australia, the United States, Czechoslovakia, Greece, South Africa, Poland, India and others, hoping openly that these would contribute to the strengthening of political ties with the native countries of the foreign armies' sportsmen. In this way, for example, the heads of the Maccabi-Avshalom Petah Tikvah club described the social activity that was a part of one of the football meetings held with British army groups in September 1940:

In the first party, on 14.9.1940, 50 army people and three officers were present. Greeting speeches were heard on our side, while the sport officer spoke on behalf of the guests. After that the guests stayed for a couple of hours and spent time with the group members singing and dancing. Finally, they thanked the reception and expressed their will to accept us in their camps for a return match.<sup>43</sup>

Matches were held not only in football but also in basketball, volleyball, water polo, athletics, swimming, boxing, riding, sailing, tennis and hockey.

Nevertheless, from time to time arguments continued to be heard about the discrimination against Jewish footballers by British referees, and at times violent clashes took place between players of both sides (including senior British officers making anti-Semitic remarks towards their Jewish competitors).<sup>44</sup> However, these cases were the exception to the rule.

The high point of sporting relations with foreign military people was the visit of the famous British football team 'Wonders' to Palestine in 1941, 1943 and 1944. The players of this team gained a reputation for their skilful play and travelled around the Middle East to wherever British units stayed, playing matches and entertaining personnel. The first tour of the 'Wonders' to Palestine raised hopes that 'Hebrew sport would be given a possibility to shake the hands of the English sport's proxy in friendship and peace'.<sup>45</sup> However the Palestine Football Federation, which wanted to organize the best players of the Jewish *Yishuv* against the host team, encountered an uncompromising demand from the British government that a 'mixed' team consisting of representatives of different communities and circles be put together. The failure of that team, which had been assembled rather hastily and consisted of six Jews, three English, one Arab and one Greek, was devastating. In front of 12,000 spectators in Tel Aviv the team was beaten 8-3, while at half time the score was 8-0 and only after the Arab goalkeeper was replaced by a Jew did the team become competitive.<sup>46</sup> In the Wonders' next visits, Hebrew teams continued to struggle against an adversary whose professional superiority was undoubted. In 1943 the match between the Wonders and the Maccabi Land of Israel football team ended 0-0. The British footballers won against Beitar Tel Aviv 3-1 and with same result against a Hapoel team. In 1944 the Wonders beat a Hapoel team 2-0, Maccabi 3-0 and Beitar Tel Aviv 3-1.

### **1945-48: Imposing a Renewed Ban on Sports Meetings Between Jews and the British**

The three years from the end of Second World War to the establishment of the state of Israel were characterized by the consolidation of the Jewish settlement in Palestine into a relatively autonomous national community. From the autumn of 1945 until the summer of 1946, against a background of frustration and anger at the British authorities' refusal to allow Jewish holocaust refugees from Europe to enter the country, a fierce armed struggle, agreed upon by most of the community's circles, was conducted against the Mandate regime's representatives. At the end of 1946 the advocates of the Zionist leadership's moderate line gained the upper hand, although certain factions continued the military struggle against the British.

During the Second World War the international activity of Jewish sportsmen in Palestine was restricted to meetings with Allied soldiers and representatives of adjacent countries; the three years that followed the war were characterized by the

sporting representation of a national entity on the verge of independence. On the other hand, as a result of the increasing struggle for the political future of Palestine, a crisis was created in relations with British army sportsmen. As the violent confrontation erupted, British army commanders started to object to contests against civilian teams. Initially a new administrative procedure required playing teams, before each game, to obtain authorization from a special committee headed by a senior officer. When the number of violent political incidents increased, the approach of army heads became more rigid, and in April 1945 a total ban was imposed on sporting competitions between military and Jewish civil teams (a more lenient attitude was practised in the case of meetings between military football teams and Arab teams).<sup>47</sup> The Jewish press protested against this intolerant policy, but to no avail.<sup>48</sup>

In August 1947, the Mandate's leaders declared the Jewish sport movement Beitar an illegal movement, on the grounds that it consisted of activists of one of the extreme underground movements that fought the British army – the National Military Organization. In order to circumvent this order, the Beitar Association in Tel Aviv changed its name to Nordia (named after the outstanding Zionist leader, Max Nordau) and committed itself, albeit only formally, not to act unlawfully against the British.<sup>49</sup> Three months following this event, on 29 November, the UN assembly decided upon the dividing of Palestine into two states – Jewish and Arab. The day after the resolution, a violent war broke in the country. The victory of the Jews in the war led eventually to the declaration of independence, on 14 May 1948, and to the departure of the British army from the region. This gave rise to a state of emergency and to the paralysis of the sport in the country. Thirty years of football history in the colonial era of Palestine ended in this quite gloomy manner.

## Summary

The 30 years of British rule in Palestine (1918–48) constitute a short chapter in the long history of this country. Nonetheless, it was a period in which the country changed markedly. The British government promoted the modernization processes of Palestine in all realms of life and fostered convenient conditions which enabled the growth of a modern national Jewish society that could thus fulfil its vision of independence after many generations. Hebrew education and culture had a very important role in the formation of this new society, and Zionist sports activists saw themselves as an integral part of a wide trend of cultural prosperity, voluntarily fulfilling a meaningful social and political mission. These years would be remembered as the time when modern Western sport took root in Palestine. In particular, it was football that became indisputably the most popular sport.

As in other developing societies that strove to achieve political sovereignty or to establish the status of a new nation state, in Jewish society in Palestine major sporting events became the foci of immense national solidarity. Unlike other

societies, however, where the penetration of the sports phenomenon was deep and where sports were more eagerly adopted and thus became a major component of the cultural identity of the colonial government elite (e.g. rugby and cricket in Australia), in Jewish society in Palestine, which developed according to modern lines and patterns and became a community in its own right,<sup>50</sup> sport was not the main axis around which cultural life revolved. Nonetheless, football was considered the predominant leisure activity, attracting the attention of thousands of sports fans and having the power to bring together local Jews and the various arms of Mandatory civil and military government. In fact, football in Palestine constituted a kind of mirror, or litmus test, for diagnosing the psychological climate of Jewish-British relations: in times of security and rest, friction between players on the football pitch did not turn into violent confrontation, the implications of which went beyond stadium boundaries. Conversely, in the years when the political and military arena in the region reached 'boiling point', external developments threatened to affect the delicate fabric of relations created between sportsmen and sports fans on both sides. Thus it happened more than once that the Mandate authorities were compelled to order the cessation of official competitions between Jewish and British sports teams until the danger was past.

The residues of the struggle that took place in Palestine in the last three years of the British Mandate regime were apparent in the first period of the State of Israel's independence. In 1950, before the visit of the English football team Hull City to Israel, a protest was expressed in the local press:

We have not forgotten as yet the 'friendship' of the Britons. The blood which was spilled like water because of, and through, them ... has not dried up yet; it is too soon to have relations such as this with 'Albion the Traitor'. She has to prove first that she changed her mind and atoned for all her sins. Therefore, let the Hebrews not play against the Britons on the bloody soil!<sup>51</sup>

Except for the verbal protest, this demand had no practical results and the visit of the British sportsmen to Israel took place as planned. This episode, the roots of which are embedded, as aforesaid, in the colonial reality existing before the establishment of the State of Israel, constitutes a remarkable epilogue to football's years of boom and depression in Palestine in the first half of the twentieth century.

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## NOTES

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1. See C. Becker, W. Buss and L. Peiffer, 'Sport and Physical Activity in Nationalistic Europe', in J.R. Polidoro (ed.), *Sport and Physical Activity in the Modern World* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000), pp.36–7; H. Perkin, 'Teaching the Nations How to Play: Sport and Society in the British Empire and Commonwealth', *International Journal of the History of Sport*, 6, 3 (Sept. 1989), 148–53; J. Sugden, 'Sport and Nationalism in the Modern World', in L. Allison (ed.), *Working Papers in Sport and Society*, Vol.3 (Coventry: University of Warwick Centre for the Study of Sport in Society, 1994/95), pp.32–4.
2. For example, D. Horowitz and M. Lissak, *The Origins of the Israeli Polity: The Political System of the Jewish Community in Palestine under the Mandate* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1977), pp.47–8, 227–31.
3. H. Harif, 'Sport and International Politics: The Political Functions of Representative Sport in Eretz-Israel and in the State of Israel, 1898–1960' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Bar-Illan University, 2002), pp.159–93.
4. The Maccabi movement was initially affiliated with the general Zionist movement, the forerunner of the Liberal Party which subsequently became a partner in the Likud party. But the Maccabi movement quickly became depoliticized. This happened less rapidly with Hapoel, which was founded in 1926 and affiliated with the Histadrut-General Federation of Labour, dominated by successive labour parties. See also J. Yekutieli and D. Tidhar (eds.), *The Maccabi Album, Jaffa-Tel Aviv (1906–1956)* (Tel Aviv: Maccabi Sports Club Tel Aviv, 1956), p.20; N. Beit-Halevi, 'Development of Football in the Land of Israel until 1928', *Physical Education*, 33, 4 (1977), 11.
5. David Tidhar, one of the prominent activists of the Maccabi Jewish Sports Federation, claims to have been the one who taught Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish Republic in 1923, the game of football. See D. Tidhar, *In the Service of the Homeland (1912–1960): Memoirs, Characters, Documents and Pictures* (Tel Aviv: Yedidim, 1960), pp.35–6.
6. Z. Nishri, *A Brief History of Physical Education* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Education and Culture, Department of Physical Training, 1953), p.49.
7. The most notable sportsman was Shimon Leumi-Retner ('Lomek'), who before immigrating to Palestine was active at the Jewish sports club Hakoach Vina (established in 1909). See Y. Arazi and Y. Paz (eds.), *50th Anniversary – Israel Football Association 1928–78* (Ramat-Gan: Massada, 1978), p.30; Y. Gabai and Y. Paz, *70 Years of the Israel Football Association, 1928–98* (Tel Aviv: Israel Football Association, 1998), p.28.
8. Yekutieli and Tidhar, *The Maccabi Album*, p.69.
9. J. Yekutieli, 'Opening', October 1927, Central Zionist Archive (henceforth: CZA), S25/661.
10. S. Tshernovitz, 'Foot-ball and head-ball', *Ha'aretz*, 22 Jan. 1924, 4.
11. 'On the Basis of a Sportive Club in Tel Aviv', *Ha'aretz*, 2 March 1924, 2.
12. A.J. Sherman, *Mandate Days: British Lives in Palestine 1918–1948* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), pp.51–2, 59–60.
13. N. Beit-Halevi, 'The Football in the Land of Israel since the Founding of the Association to the Establishing of the State of Israel', *Physical Education*, 34, 2 (1978), 3–4; H. Kaufman, 'England is Losing', *Et-Mol*, 23, 2 [136] (Jan. 1998), 6–7. Following the appeal of the opposing team, Maccabi-Hashmonai Jerusalem, over the unlawful participation of a Tel Aviv player, it was determined that both Jewish teams would share the cup.
14. J. Yekutieli, *Over a Jubilee, 50+ : Memories from 'Maccabi', from the Turkish Army in the First World War and from the Hebrew Sports Movement in the Land of Israel, Second Part* (Author's Publishing, 1975), pp.49–51.
15. *Ibid.*, pp.71–4. Following the establishment of the Palestine Football Federation, the Federation of the Amateur Sports Clubs of Palestine, which regulated activity in various sports, was founded (1931) followed by the Palestine Olympic Committee (1933).
16. Lipa Liviatan, 'The Group of the "Land of Israel" "P" in Egypt', *Doar Hayom*, 10 April 1930, 3. See also D. Tidhar, 'Football Team from the Land of Israel in Egypt', *Davar*, 10 April 1930, 3.
17. See e.g. the secretary of the Maccabi Tel Aviv Federation to Col. F.H. Kisch, 2 March 1926, CZA S25/659/2.
18. Yekutieli and Tidhar, *The Maccabi Album*, p.79, H. Visburg, 'Around the Tour of Maccabi Hagibor

- to America (A)', *Doar Hayom*, 11 May 1927, 3: letter (not addressed) from F.H. Kisch, 6 Feb. 1927, CZA S25/661.
19. Yekutieli and Tidhar, *The Maccabi Album*, pp.79-80.
  20. *Ibid.*, p.82.
  21. F.H. Kisch letter, 6 Feb. 1927, CZA S25/661.
  22. The 'White Book' of 1930 is a report compiled by the Colonial Minister in the British Cabinet, Lord Pasfield, on the situation in Palestine, in which it was stipulated that acquisition of land by Jews should be controlled and that their immigration to the country should be restricted.
  23. 'Statement of an eye-witness at the game between the Maccabi Football Group and the RAF at Ramleh on November 10th 1930', CZA S25/6909; J. Gordon to Col. Kisch, 'Interdiction by HE of Football Games with Jews', 27 Nov. 1930, *ibid.*; Central Committee of the Hapoel Association to Col. Kisch, 21 Jan. 1931, *ibid.*
  24. A. Perlstein and Y. Shochat to Kisch, 21 Jan. 1931, CZA S25/6909.
  25. The British police won the Land of Israel cup that year when a technical win was ruled in its favour, due to inappropriate behaviour by the Hapoel Haifa team, their adversary in the finals. See Beit-Halevi, 5-6.
  26. Kaufman, 'England is Losing', 7.
  27. *Ha'aretz*, 21 Sept. 1934, 9.
  28. M. Bnayahu, 'For the Benefit of Football', *Ha'aretz*, 9 Aug. 1935, 2.
  29. H. Ziv and Y. Gelber, *The Bow Bearers* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defence, 1998), pp.82-91.
  30. Chet to Col. Kisch (p.1), 28 Sept. 1936, CZA S25/3376.
  31. *Ibid.*, p.3.
  32. *Ibid.*, p.2.
  33. *Ibid.*
  34. Col. Kisch, 'To All Parties Interested', 5 Oct. 1936, CZA S25/3376.
  35. Hapoel to R. Zaslani, 3 Nov. 1936, CZA S25/3376.
  36. The General Secretary and the Treasurer of the Palestine Football Federation to the Manager of the Political Department of the Jewish Agency to the Land of Israel, 3 Dec. 1937, CZA S25/6281.
  37. Translation of the letter to Hebrew is cited in the newspaper *Sport Haboker*, 4 Dec. 1937. Following the release of the letter, Zelig Rosetzki, a senior member of Maccabi, complained to the heads of the Zionist movement about their political inadequacy in the sport: 'You can even not like this view, you can think of "chasing after sport" as a negative presentation of the modern culture. However, a sharp politician knows how to exploit even negative phenomena to his political goals. The question arises: why did you not do anything until now to exploit the Jewish sport movement for propaganda for the building of our national home?' See 'What Does the Farewell Letter of the English Soldiers Teach Us?' *Sport Haboker*, 11 Feb. 1937.
  38. S. Samet, 'To Fulfil an Important Role', *Ha'aretz*, 17 April 1936, 12. On sporting relations between Jews and Arabs in Palestine in the 1920s and 1930s, see also 'A Ridiculous Boycott on the Hebrew Sport', *Doar Hayom*, 16 Nov. 1932, 6.
  39. Y. Gelber, 'The Consolidation of Jewish Society in Eretz-Israel, 1936-1947', in M. Lissak, A. Shapira and G. Cohen (eds.), *The History of the Jewish Community in Eretz-Israel since 1882, Part 2: The Period of the British Mandate* (Jerusalem: Israeli Academy for Sciences and Humanities and The Bialik Institution, 1994), pp.412-16.
  40. A. Nethanel and Z. Rosetzki, 'A Memorandum to the Jewish Agency to the Land of Israel on Having Sport Ties with the British Army in the Country', 21 March 1940, CZA S25/6281.
  41. On the positive image of Australian soldiers in the eyes of the *Yishuv*, see Gelber, 'The Consolidation of Jewish Society', pp.415-16.
  42. Y. Golan to Y. Aluf, 26 March 1940, CZA S25/6281; 'Golan to the Central Committee of Maccabi', 11 Aug. 1940, *ibid.*
  43. 'Maccabi-Avshalom Petah-Tikvah club to the Central Committee of Maccabi', 7 Oct. 1940, CZA S25/6281.
  44. See e.g. 'C. Sholovitz to the Jewish Agency', 28 July 1943, CZA S25/6281.
  45. A. Al., 'Wonders', *Sport Haboker*, 30 Nov. 1941.
  46. N. Ben-Avraham, *Sport Israel* (Tel Aviv: Dekel and Or, 1968), p.20; Gabai and Paz, pp.40-41.
  47. As a result of the new regulations, the Wonders team that visited Palestine again in summer of 1946 was not allowed to compete with Hapoel football players. See H. Beilin to B. Yosef, 17 July 1946, CZA S25/6693.

48. Ben-Eliyahu, 'Why Did Foreign Sportsmen Not Come?', *Hamashkif*, 9 June 1946, 3; 'The Eretz-Israeli Football is in a Slump', *Hamashkif*, 14 July 1946, 3.
49. M. Kashtan, *60 Years of Football: The Story of Lusia Devorin* (Tel Aviv: self-publication, 1991), pp.58-9.
50. B. Halpern and J. Reinharz, *Zionism and the Creation of a New Society* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Centre, 2000), pp.306-16.
51. *Hasport Ha'leumi*, 2 May 1950, 2. It should be noted that this newspaper represented the position of the most hawkish stream in Israeli politics of those days.

