

Arab and Middle Eastern Sport

Critical Muslim Perspectives

Edited by

**Adam Ehsan Ali
Umer Hussain**



**Research in the
Sociology of Sport**

**VOL
27**

ARAB AND MIDDLE EASTERN SPORT

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 27

ARAB AND MIDDLE EASTERN SPORT: CRITICAL MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES

EDITED BY

ADAM EHSAN ALI

Western University, Canada

AND

UMER HUSSAIN

Wilkes University, USA



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

This volume is dedicated to martyrs, survivors, refugees, immigrants, the displaced and activists within the ongoing conflicts in the Arab, Middle Eastern and Muslim worlds, many of whom use sport and movement to resist, subvert and challenge neo-colonial violence and oppression in their everyday lives.

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ABOUT THE EDITORS

Adam Ehsan Ali is an Assistant Professor of Sociocultural Studies in the School of Kinesiology at Western University in London, Ontario, Canada. His research explores anti-Islamic racism, radicalization and sport in the post-9/11 era and is grounded in post-colonial, feminist and critical race theory. Dr Ali specializes in critical discourse, policy and media analyses, and his work appears in the *Sociology of Sport Journal*, *Sport, Education, and Society*, *Communication and Sport*, *Diaspora, Indigenous, and Minority Education* and *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*.

Umer Hussain is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management at Wilkes University, USA. His research areas include exploring the intersection of race, religion and gender in sports. Hussain has made significant contributions to the field through numerous publications in prestigious academic journals and has actively shared his insights at international conferences. His doctoral dissertation was recognized for its outstanding contribution to the Social Sciences and was honoured with the Distinguished Dissertation Award by Texas A&M University, USA.

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ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Emma S. Ariyo, Gonzaga University, is a scholar and educator whose work primarily focuses on sport management, sport policy and sport sociology. Her research examines the intersections of cultural studies of sport, Black female athlete identity and the role of sport and physical activity as tools for social change and development. A former student-athlete in both soccer and volleyball, Dr Ariyo hails from Uganda and draws on her experiences to inform her academic work. She has published book chapters exploring the sociocultural dimensions of sport as well as articles in peer-reviewed academic journals.

Rabia Farooq is an emerging research scholar from Pakistan specializing in the field of Management Sciences. She holds a Master's degree in Management Sciences from COMSATS University Islamabad, where her dissertation critically examined the impact of corporate governance, with particular emphasis on the role of female participation within the corporate sector of Pakistan. Ms Farooq has contributed to the academic community through several peer-reviewed articles published in reputable journals in Pakistan. Looking ahead, she plans to pursue a PhD that will expand the discourse on women's empowerment, exploring the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective.

Guilherme Silva Pires de Freitas received his PhD from the Social Change and Political Participation Post-Graduation Programme of the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, Brazil (2024). Freitas is a researcher on migration, refuge, identities and the sociology of sport and has been an associate member of the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) since 2022.

Billy Graeff is an Associate Professor at the Federal University of Rio Grande in Brazil, where he teaches courses on the sociology of sports and Olympic studies, and a Research Fellow within the Center for Sport Leadership at Stellenbosch University, South Africa. He is the General Secretary of the International Sociology of Sport Association (ISSA), and part of the International Olympic Academy Participants Association (IOAPA), the Latin American Association of Sociocultural Studies of Sport (ALESDE) and the Brazilian College for the Sports Sciences (CBCE).

Felipe Antonio Honorato (Brazil) is a PhD in Social Change and Political Participation by the School of Arts, Sciences and Humanities of the University of São Paulo, Brazil. Honorato is also a member of the editorial board of "Encuentro Latinoamericano: Revista de Ciencia Política" (ELA) and the *Berkeley Journal of*

Sociology. He was a visiting PhD researcher in the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology of KU Leuven, Belgium (2023–2024) and served as research intern at the Center for Ibero-American Studies of Charles University, Czech Republic (2022–2023).

Farah J. Ishaq is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management in the Department of Kinesiology and Physical Education at Northern Illinois University. Dr Ishaq has volunteered with Reclaim Childhood in their flagship summer camp in Jordan helping refugee girls from seven countries build community through learning and playing sport. Ishaq also brings a background in research on higher education theory and high-impact educational practices, particularly within the setting of student-athlete experience.

İrem Kavasoglu is an Associate Professor at Cukurova University, Faculty of Sports Sciences, Department of Sport Management. She graduated from Gazi University Faculty of Sport Sciences in 2017 with her doctoral thesis in which she discovered the culture of favouritism in Men's Football. She focuses on the history of women's sports and women's football, particularly body politics and homophobia, women in sports and social media, the experience of body and cyber violence and the position of LGBTQ people in sports environments. She is a board member of the Turkish Sports and Physical Activity Association for Women. She is also a member of the Muamma Football Team, one of the teams fighting against heterosexism and homophobia in football.

Asma Khalil is a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto. Her research uses decolonial and feminist approaches to understand the health and sport experiences of marginalized women, with a particular focus on Black and/or Muslim women. Asma is very passionate about working within the community to bring about change.

Jorge Knijnik is an Associate Professor at Western Sydney University (Australia). His most recent books are *A Critical History of Health, Sport and Physical Education: The Three-Legged Curriculum in Australia* (Springer, with M. Gorzanelli), *Tales of South American Football: Passion, Revolution and Glory* and *The World Cup Chronicles: 31 Days That Rocked Brazil* (both by Fair Play Publishing). He is a supporter of Al-Hilal Saudi FC.

Canan Koca is a Professor in the Faculty of Sports Sciences, Hacettepe University, Turkey. Dr Koca's research examines sport, physical activity and physical education from a gendered perspective. She has published widely in refereed journals such as *Sex Roles; Sport Education and Society; Gender and Education; Gender Work and Organization; Leisure Studies* and *Journal of Leisure Research*. She also delivers gender equality, safe sports and athlete protection training to coaches and athletes. She is the President of the Turkish Association of Sport and Physical Activity for Women (KASFAD) and worked as an executive board member of International Association of Physical Education and Sport for Girls and Women (IAPESGW) (2009–2013/2013–2017).

Mahdi Latiffard (PhD, Tarbiat Modares University) specializes in sports communication and journalism, with a particular focus on media practices in countries lacking a free press. His research focuses on the intersection of social media and journalism within the sports industry, offering critical insights into this evolving field.

Muhammad Haroon Rasheed is an accomplished academic and researcher, currently serving as an International Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the College of Economics and Management, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, China. He also holds a permanent lecturer (commerce) position at the Malik Firoz Khan Noon Business School, University of Sargodha, Pakistan. With over a decade of academic and professional experience, Dr Rasheed specializes in the field of behavioural finance, focusing on the intricate dynamics of individual behaviour. His contributions to the academic community include peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and presentations delivered at prestigious national and international forums.

Simona Šafaříková is an Assistant Professor at the Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic and Stellenbosch University in South Africa, teaching courses focused on sport and development, development opportunities in the Asian region and qualitative research. Her research focuses on the role of sport in contributing to social change and in achieving non-sporting goals. She has experience in doing ‘sport for development’ research in Latin America, Uganda or Saudi Arabia.

Marjan Saffari is a PhD student at the University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Canada. Previously, she was an Assistant Professor of sport management at Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran, Iran. Her research focuses on leisure, sport and tourism socio-cultural topics. She was also the Vice President of the Iran National University Sports Federation (NUSF) and the Director of the Sport Management Centre of the National Olympic Academy of Iran (NOA).

Moetiz Samad earned his PhD in Sport Management from The Ohio State University, where he serves as a Visiting Assistant Professor. Moetiz currently teaches undergraduate and graduate-level courses on: sport law, consumer behaviours, sport research, trademark and licencing and collegiate sport. His administrative responsibilities include serving as the Undergraduate Chair for Sport Industry and the programme lead on the Undergraduate Studies Curriculum Committee. His research interests include the intersection of sport and social injustices. Being a second-generation Palestinian born in the States, he is compelled to research, study and write about the lives of his culture and lineage. While much of his research agenda has covered the topics of race, gender, religion, ethnicity and athletic identity, he aims to merge these ideas to find commonalities between the meaningful lives Palestinians lead and those of others who want to do well in this world.

Katherine C. Stenning (Gonzaga University) is a graduate student in the Master's programme in Sport and Athletic Administration at Gonzaga University, where she is pursuing her passion for sport management. Originally from England, Katherine is an accomplished crew athlete and coach at Gonzaga, where she has developed strong leadership and athletic skills. She serves as the President of the Sport Management Club, actively connecting with peers and professionals to deepen the understanding of the sport industry. Katherine plans to pursue a PhD in Sport Management starting in Fall 2025.

Arnošt Svoboda is an Assistant Professor at the Palacký University Olomouc (Czech Republic). He teaches sociology of sport and leisure, sport for development and methodology of social research. Currently, he has been involved in research projects in Latin America (studying local sports for development projects linked to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals), Saudi Arabia (current trends in youth sports) and the Czech Republic (potential of sports programmes for social cohesion).

Ryan Turcott's (Gonzaga University) scholarship and teaching contributions are in the areas of the sociology of sport and sport management. His primary research interests include sport for development, sports labour markets in relation to global athletic migration and global politics of international sport. In addition to publishing several book chapters pertaining to the sociological and historical aspects of sport, Dr Turcott has published in several peer-reviewed academic journals, including the *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, the *International Journal of Sport Management* and the *Journal of Contemporary Athletics*.

Amin Yadegari (MSc, Shahid Beheshti University) is an expert in sports marketing, with a focus on analyzing the sports events across social media platforms. His research explores the portrayal of sports news and events across social media, contributing valuable insights into this dynamic field. Additionally, he serves as a reviewer for the *International Journal of Sport Communication*.

INTRODUCTION: THE CASE FOR ARAB, MIDDLE EASTERN, AND MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES ON SPORT

Adam Ehsan Ali^a and Umer Hussain^b

^a*Western University, Canada*

^b*Wilkes University, USA*

In the extant scholarship, there remains a paucity of sociological literature on the role and place of sport within the Arab World and the Middle East that centralizes a critical Muslim perspective. This is significant given both its immense geographical scope and the continued and emerging social and political issues within the Muslim world, in which sport and physical cultures play an important role (Reiche & Sorek, 2019). These issues include the recent entrance of Arab states into the Western sporting landscape, with examples including Saudi Arabia's partnership with the PGA tour (Davis et al., 2023) and Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup (Qadri, 2022); the lasting impact of colonial legacies (Prouse, 2013) and ongoing Western interventions in the Arab and Muslim world (Hussain & Cunningham, 2022), and the role of sport in perpetuating and challenging the resulting inequities (see Spaaij et al., 2015), violence (see Guilbert, 2004), and mass displacement (see Rocha & Xiao, 2022) within Muslim and Arab communities.

This omission is significant within the context of the groundbreaking participation of the first hijab-wearing footballer, Nouhaila Benzina, in the 2023 FIFA Women's World Cup (WWC), which has reignited conversations in the Western world concerning the "state of women" within Muslim and Arab nations. Such conversations often pivot around racialized and gendered constructions of Muslim men as violent and misogynistic and of Muslim women as passive and in need of saving from an inherently patriarchal culture (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Lewis, 1996; Yegenoglu, 1998). And yet, sport and physical activity have been central to the activism of women within these nations, highlighted recently by the 2022 "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement in Iran. This advocacy as well as the increasing presence of Muslim women like Benzina, Ibtihaj Muhammad, Bilqis

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Abdul-Qadir, Ruqaya Al-Ghasra, and others within Western, Arab, and Middle Eastern sport media landscapes have acted as important counternarratives to the problematic and myopic perceptions of Muslim women as agentless and out-of-place within sport settings (Samie & Sehlikoglu, 2015).

Moreover, sports have evolved into a formidable instrument for galvanizing social movements within Arab and Middle Eastern societies. These movements have opposed state-authorized repression, contested Western supremacy, propelled nation-building endeavors, and fortified community resilience, illustrating the profound impact of sport in reshaping these regions. The Gaza Sunbirds, a para-cycling team in Palestine, represents a recent example of such a movement. This group of athletes has provided community aid across the Gaza Strip amid Israel's genocidal campaign and has inspired rides of solidarity within the international community to help fund their work and humanize the Palestinian community. Examples such as these stand in stark contrast to the inaction by international (Western-led) sporting federations such as FIFA and the International Olympic Committee in responding to this crisis.

Given this context, grasping how individuals across Muslim, Middle Eastern, and Arab cultures engage in and experience sport as athletes, coaches, spectators, administrators, and consumers is essential to enriching and broadening discourse within the sport studies scholarship (see Andrews, 2002; Thibault, 2009; Zeigler, 2007). Scholars have, however, persistently recognized and illuminated the pervasive and escalating "Eurocentrism" that underpins much of the existing sport scholarship in this area (Chen & Mason, 2019; Hussain & Cunningham, 2022; Singer, 2005). For example, Chen and Mason (2019) registered that the sport management literature is profoundly entrenched in epistemic injustices and have urged scholars to foreground and critically address the underlying structures of settler colonialism within this area. Likewise, Hussain and Cunningham (2022) conducted a scoping review of existing research on Muslim communities in sport. The authors found that most of the research on Muslim communities is conducted in Western contexts (62.4%) with a special focus on Muslim women. Hussain and Cunningham (2022) further argued that an Orientalist trope exists in the current research concerning Muslim communities. Thus, there remains a notable gap in the literature concerning the sporting experiences of Muslim communities residing in Muslim-majority countries and, more broadly, across the Global South from a non-Western and non-Eurocentric perspective.

Nonetheless, mega-events such as the FIFA 2022 Men's World Cup in Qatar and the increasing emphasis on professional sports in Middle Eastern countries (e.g., the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates mega-events investment) have sparked a renewed interest in the relationship between Muslim-majority nations and sports (see Al-Emadi et al., 2024; Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2014; Dergaa et al., 2022; Grix et al., 2023). Despite this renewed interest, and as mentioned previously, there remains a notable dearth of sociological literature examining the role and significance of sport in the Arab World and the Middle East, especially through a critical "Muslim perspective" (Amara, 2011; Hussain & Cunningham, 2022). Our definition of this perspective aligns with that of *Re-Orient: The Journal of Critical Muslim Studies*, which characterizes it "by a

series of epistemological orientations, rather than by substantive properties, permanent categories, or persistent methodologies” (The Editorial Board, 2015, p. 6). These orientations are grouped into four categories: (1) a critique of Eurocentrism, (2) an ongoing suspicion of positivism and neutrality in knowledge production, (3) a recognition of the importance of critiquing Orientalism, and (4) an embracing of post-colonial and decolonial thinking. The lack of substantive consideration for critical Muslim perspectives within the field of sports studies is particularly significant given the region’s vast population (e.g., 50 Muslim-majority countries) and its persistent and emerging sociopolitical dynamics (see Reiche & Sorek, 2019). The chapters that follow in this volume aim to take up one or more of these epistemological orientations.

In the current global discourse, moreover, a range of critical developments warrant scholars to take a critical “Muslim perspective” to understand the issues of Muslim communities within the Global South and beyond. The Western violence in Arab regions, for example, Western bloc support for the Israeli regime in opposition to the Palestinian cause and the wars in Syria and Iraq, further underscores the complex historical and contemporary contexts that shape these communities and their physical activity participation. These events also highlight the interplay between global sports, neo-liberalism, capitalism, and the enduring influence of colonial and post-colonial legacies.

As such, and in alignment with the principles of critical Muslim studies noted above, the purpose of this edited book volume is to use sport and physical cultures as a lens to (a) interrogate and challenge Orientalist, Eurocentric, and positivist narratives surrounding Arab and Middle Eastern cultures and communities; (b) engage with intersectional, post-colonial, and decolonial frameworks to advance the scholarship; and (c) amplify and validate the sporting knowledge and lived experiences of individuals living within the Muslim world and beyond. This volume, thus, addresses the pressing need for a critical Muslim studies perspective on sport and physical cultures in the Arab World, the Middle East, and North Africa. We endeavored to do so by uniting a diverse group of established and emerging scholars to explore and write about sport and the Muslim world.

THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE VOLUME: CHALLENGING ORIENTALISM AND BEYOND

As seen in the description of chapters to come, one of the major contributions of this edited collection is its engagement with Edward Said’s (1978) description and critique of Orientalism. In his groundbreaking work of the same name, Said defines Orientalism as “an enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (p. 3). Said’s work demonstrates how the Orient, or the “Middle East” in its more modern iteration, and its inhabitants are represented as backward, antidemocratic, barbaric, and underdeveloped within Euro-American texts, popular media, and

government policy. In doing so, this overarching framework constructs and maintains an incommensurable difference between the West and the “Muslim” world, the latter of which flattens diverse cultures, regions, religions and nations within the Middle East, the Arab world, North Africa, and South Asia into a singular and homogenous form. This is accomplished through Orientalism’s concomitant portrayal of the West as a rational, modern, democratic and advanced civilization, a portrayal that is juxtaposed with the constructed inferiority of Muslims.

As previously noted, this Orientalist discourse is gendered in ways that characterize Muslim men as dangerous patriarchs and Muslim women as passive victims and assumes that the Muslim world is universally and inherently homophobic. The West, conversely, is reproduced as the beacon of sexual liberation for women and LGBTQ+ communities. And in post-9/11 repertoires of Orientalism, these stereotypes have been amplified through the construction of Muslims as inherently suspicious and always possibly on the brink of committing terrorist violence. Such representations have served as justifications for US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have resulted in the deaths of thousands of citizens in these nations while also paving the way for counter-terrorism regimes operating in Western nations that have surveilled, detained, and criminalized Muslim communities. They have also enflamed anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant rhetoric and have become omnipresent within discourses of rising alt-right political figures within North America, the United Kingdom, and Western Europe.

Through the chapters to come, this collection critically engages with and builds from the sport studies literature on Orientalism and other non-Western perspectives, which we contend is simultaneously burgeoning but relatively nascent within the sociological scholarship. This work has critiqued Western representations of Muslim sportswomen (Amara, 2012; 2008; Samie, 2017; Samie & Sehlikoglu, 2015; Samie & Toffoletti, 2018), Muslim sportsmen (Hussain & Bien-Aimé, 2024; Burdsey, 2016; 2007; Falcous & Silk, 2006; Malcolm et al., 2010), sport mega-events hosted by Muslim nations (Swart & Hussain, 2023), and sport for development and peace (SDP) (Darnell, 2014). Recent scholarship has focused on the rise of sport as a tool for the deradicalization of Muslim and migrant youth within the post-9/11 era (Ali, 2024; Ali & King, 2021). This work has found that Orientalist assumptions implying that Muslim-looking people and communities are especially susceptible to violent extremism inform dominant representations of this growing phenomenon.

There is limited literature that has also focused on how Orientalist portrayals of Muslim men and women in sport have been contested within the West. Nishfa Rizwan and Adam Ali (2025), for example, traced social media reactions to the celebrations of Nouhaila Benzina at the 2023 FIFA WWC. Their findings suggest that online spaces can be sites for the reproduction of Orientalist and Islamophobic ideas regarding Muslim women but also act as important sites for resisting such representations. These findings are mirrored in research illuminating the ways in which Muslim sportswomen have utilized digital media to challenge racialized and gendered stereotypes (Ahmad & Thorpe, 2020).

Indeed, leading scholars in the field, such as Aarti [Ratna \(2024, 2016, 2011; Ratna & Samie, 2017\)](#) and Stanley Thangaraj ([2015, 2010](#)), have demonstrated the ways that Muslim and South Asian men and women have both navigated and resisted challenges in Western sport spaces. Finally, Umer Hussain's exploration of the lived experiences of Pakistani women sport managers in Gilgit Baltistan ([Hussain et al., 2023](#)) and Kabaddi and Kho-Kho athletes in Southern Punjab ([Hussain & Cunningham, 2021](#)) stand as important exceptions to the lack of sociological scholarship focusing on Muslim sportswomen in non-Western nations.

This collection both builds from and extends the existing scholarly literature in the following ways: first, it centers and privileges the experiences of athletes and sport participants who reside in Arab and Middle Eastern nations, and, as such, it is one of the first substantive sociological volumes to highlight perspectives that have been largely subjugated within the academic literature. Second, it offers nuanced, contested and heterogeneous analyses of sport topics central to this region, including gender equality, religion, mass media, mega-events, social media, war and conflict, international relations, and liberation movements. In doing so, the collection unsettles Orientalist, homogenous framings of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and Arab nations, communities, and people within the sport studies literature. Third, and relatedly, the volume challenges these monolithic framings through a variety of methodologies, including media analyses, ethnography, cultural studies, and case studies. As such, the collection provides a diverse methodological and theoretical roadmap for current and future researchers seeking a complex understanding of Muslim, Middle Eastern, and Arab sporting cultures. Finally, most of our contributors have familial, religious, geographic, national, and cultural connections to the communities highlighted in this book. Many reside in the communities that they write about, while for some, English is not their first language. As such, this book represents an important intervention into the current (mostly Western-based) scholarship on sport within Muslim, Middle Eastern, and Arab communities because it privileges oft-subjugated voices within the academy. Our hope is that this volume helps spark a movement toward resisting and unsettling Eurocentric forms of hegemony within the critical sport studies field, particularly as it relates to research focused on subaltern communities.

INTRODUCTION OF CHAPTERS

This edited book volume brings together 11 insightful chapters that explore the multifaceted intersection of sport, culture, and societal challenges in the Arab World, the Middle East, and North Africa. The chapters in this volume cover various topics and regions, including media portrayals of Turkey's women's volleyball team, Morocco's FIFA 2022 World Cup success, and political tensions surrounding Iranian football. Other contributors have focused on gender dynamics in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and across the Middle East and the lived experiences of Muslim Palestinian footballers under the Israeli occupation. The volume also examines the historical role of the Algerian National Liberation

Front football team during the independence movement. Together, these 11 chapters explore the intersections of sport, culture, and society in these regions.

In Chapter 1, Asma Khalil traces the relationship between gender, race, and sport within Oman, where she interviewed several women pioneers working within the nation's Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Youth and its Olympic Committee. Interpreting her conversations with her participants through decolonial and Islamic feminist theory and utilizing creative storytelling and vignettes to share their perspectives, Khalil highlights the experiences of sport leadership and governance for women in Oman, outlines the unique challenges they face working in this field, and offers recommendations for addressing them.

In Chapter 2, Guilherme Silva Pires de Freitas and Felipe Antonio Honorato examine the historical case of Équipe FLN to illustrate how sport served as a unifying force during Algeria's independence struggle. The study results suggested that the FLN team's advocacy was arguably one of the most impactful tools of the revolutionary movement. This is because the FLN team's advocacy deeply aligned with the objectives outlined in Algeria's Declaration of Independence, which aimed to foster solidarity among Maghreb nations supporting Algeria's struggle and raise international awareness about the atrocities perpetrated by French forces. Freitas and Antonio's work, therefore, underscores the profound intersection of sports and politics in advancing Algeria's fight for sovereignty.

In Chapter 3, Umer Hussain and Adam Ehsan Ali critically explore how Morocco's groundbreaking success in reaching the FIFA 2022 World Cup semi-finals was portrayed by two prominent Western newspaper outlets (i.e., *The Guardian* ($n = 473$) and *The New York Times* ($n = 243$)). The authors' analysis uncovers a recurring pattern in which both publications often framed their coverage in Orientalist Eurocentric viewpoints. Hussain and Ali registered that both Western media outlets' news framing frequently exoticized Morocco's cultural identity. Their study, therefore, expands the understanding of how Western media constructs Orientalist narratives around non-Western athletes' (especially Muslim men athletes') accomplishments in global sporting mega-events.

In Chapter 4, Moetiz Samad explores the lived experiences of Muslim athletes ($n = 14$) playing football (soccer) in Palestine. Building on the foundational principles of Critical Race Theory (CRT), this chapter emphasizes the tenet of counter-narrative and storytelling. Samad, through his research, challenges colonially informed biases toward Palestinians by the Western world and its allies. As such, the study's results highlight the role sport can play as a platform for peacebuilding and for reflecting core Islamic values for Palestinian athletes. The chapter concludes by elucidating the implications of the findings and proposing future research directions for explicating Palestinian Muslims' lived experiences.

In Chapter 5, Arnošt Svoboda, Simona Šafaříková, Jorge Knijnik, and Billy Graeff explore the sport participation of young women from Saudi Arabia, which has been ostensibly bolstered by the Saudi Vision 2030 initiative. Through interviews conducted alongside their ethnographic work in the nation, Svoboda, Šafaříková, Knijnik, and Graeff illuminate the tensions concerning

the democratization of these women's and girls' participation by astutely problematizing the terms and conditions of their experiences in sport and physical activity. The authors also show how Saudi girls and women at once acknowledge and navigate the barriers within this context.

In Chapter 6, Mahdi Latifard and Amin Yadegari conduct a framing analysis of Persian-speaking responses on Twitter/X to the refusal of Iran's national football team to sing the national anthem at the 2022 FIFA World Cup in support of anti-hijab protests that broke out following the killing of Mahsa Amini by Iran's morality police on September 16, 2022. Their findings reveal the omnipresence of government-supported interpretations of Islamic values within these responses among both anti-regime and pro-regime users, while content related to both sport and women's rights themselves was marginalized. In doing so, they demonstrate the opportunities, challenges and limitations of utilizing social media as a space for promoting gender-based justice and religious values through sport in Iran.

In Chapter 7, İrem Kavasoğlu and Canan Koca compare exercise and sport cultures between the early Turkish Republic and contemporary Türkiye through a combination of historical tracing, phenomenology, and interviews with women who were once elite athletes in the nation and all of whom are significant figures within Türkiye's sport landscape. Their analysis notes the significance of Turkish modernization, particularly in response to Western hegemony, as a central motivator for increasing women's participation in physical activity and sport, and the active roles that their interviewees and many Türkiye women played in shaping the nation's global sport presence. At the same time, Kavasoğlu and Koca also reveal how the current sport system in Türkiye requires further transformative change toward achieving gender equity.

In Chapter 8, Farah J. Ishaq examines the role of sport organizations in supporting displaced and refugee communities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region through sport-based interventions (e.g., football initiatives, multi-sport programs, gender-specific activities, and adaptive sports). In his work, Ishaq highlights the potential of sport to foster inclusion, resilience, and community building among displaced populations. Nevertheless, he argues that while various sport-based intervention programs provide significant benefits, they face ongoing implementation challenges (e.g., resource constraints, cultural and language barriers, and sustainability concerns). Ishaq concludes with recommendations to improve the effectiveness of sports-based initiatives for a long-term impact in the MENA region.

In Chapter 9, Muhammad Haroon Rasheed and Rabia Farooq systematically analyze the existing literature on the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar. The authors employ a qualitative review with diverse analytical tools to uncover the multifaceted dynamics, attitudes, barriers, and opportunities linked to sports participation within the Middle East. Rasheed and Farooq emphasize the economic, cultural, and regional importance of hosting mega sporting events, such as the FIFA World Cup. Moreover, the authors reveal that Qatari scholars have predominantly led much of the research surrounding the FIFA 2022 World Cup. Therefore, they highlight a need for broader contributions from regional and

international researchers to enrich the extant discourse. Additionally, through a sentiment analysis, they register that many previous studies have approached the FIFA 2022 World Cup event with a critical negative viewpoint. Rashid and Farooq's review, overall, provides valuable insights into understanding the broader implications of hosting such global events (FIFA 2022 World Cup) in the Middle East.

In Chapter 10, Emma S. Ariyo, Ryan Turcott, and Katherine C. Stenning interrogate the narratives surrounding Turkish women volleyball players. The authors illuminate how these athletes navigate complex social, political, and religious boundaries utilizing a content analysis of international news media from 2021 to 2024. Their results indicate that Turkish pro-government media predominantly employ a *Shameful frame* (negative framing). In contrast, international media and secular Turkish outlets highlighted the athletes as *role models* or framed their achievements from a secular perspective (positive framing). Despite these differences, the overall media coverage was more supportive than critical. Ariyo, Turcott, and Stenning's overall study findings illuminate the athletes' multifaceted experiences under the conservative Tayyip Erdoğan presidential regime.

Finally, in Chapter 11, Marjan Saffari traces the Islamic Republic of Iran's mobilization of the sport sector as a tool for promoting its ideological values and presence within Iran and in the international landscape, but also as a form of control over sport organizations and athletes. Saffari also offers empirical examples of the ways that Iranian sportspeople have responded to the oppressive tactics of the regime, which include activist protests in front of sport stadiums, athletes eschewing the Iranian flag, moving to other nations and competing under their banners, and women fans disguising themselves to sneak into football matches. In doing so, Saffari's work provides a nuanced perspective of this nation that critiques the government's oppressive tactics over sporting life while illuminating the agency of Iranian athletes and fans in responding to the Republic.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this book volume addresses a broad range of topics related to the Muslim community, culture, and sports, it indeed leaves several critical issues unexplored. Thus, it offers fertile ground for future research in Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim sport. We argue that, in the future, researchers can explore different research topics related to integrating critical Muslim perspectives to expand the current scope of sport studies. For instance, in our book volume, there is a very limited discussion on sects (e.g., Sunni, Shia, Wahhabi, Salafi, Barelvi, and Deobandi) of Islam and its impact on sport participation, representation, and consumption. The intersection of Sharia law with sport consumption and participation also warrants further scholarly attention. Hence, we argue that investigating diverse theological dimensions could illuminate how various religious beliefs shape engagement with and perceptions of sport across different cultural contexts. Moreover, we must reiterate, as other scholars have (see [Hussain & Cunningham, 2022](#); [Toffoletti & Palmer, 2016](#); [Samie, 2013](#)),