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NATIONALITY SWAPPING IN WORLD ATHLETICS

Cases and Contexts from the Middle East (1998–2016)

Gijsbert Oonk and Jorn Schulting

Introduction

Ruth Jebet is a talented steeplechase runner. She was born in Kenya in 1996. At the age of 17, she became a Bahraini citizen. In this way, Bahrain attempted to acquire national and Olympic prestige by paying to switch her allegiance. And it worked: as a former Kenyan with a new Bahraini passport, Ruth Jebet won the Asian games in 2013 and became an Olympic champion for Bahrain in 2016. She was more than happy with the arrangement. The deal allowed her to keep training at the highest level at excellent training facilities in Bahrain with professional support required for Olympic athletes. She now had a pension with which she could take care of her parents and children. She ended up with the respect of a world-class top athlete, a status that would not have been possible in Kenya (Oonk 2019, 10).

Knowing that Jebet was Kenyan ‘in her heart’, the Kenyan population adored and cheered her on. Kenyan athletics association officials, however, were not quite so delighted. They felt that they had been investing in Jebet’s and other athletes’ talent for many years; for them, it was very bitter indeed to see their best talent being poached by and now representing another country. This was not what their athletic programme had set out to achieve.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) and World Athletics (prior to October 2019, known as the International Amateur Athletic Federation or International Association of Athletics Federations (IAAF)) questioned whether this would cause inequity in the Olympic Games, with the wealthiest countries buying the best athletes and winning the most medals. However, the IAAF and IOC appeared to be conveniently forgetting that those countries with the largest investments in sports and athletes do win the most medals. This is already the case at present (Horowitz and McDaniel 2015; Oonk 2019).

Background

Cases like Ruth Jebet’s threaten traditional notions of citizenship, nationality and identity. In the ideal western notion of citizenship, there is a strong connection between the country one represents in the international sports arena, and their birth country, parents’ birth countries and

where one works and pays taxes. Elsewhere, this concept has been labelled as *thick citizenship* (Oonk 2020). Athletes with no prior relations with the country they represent before paying for a citizenship transfer may be labelled as *thin citizens*. These cases often raise moral, legal and factual questions: Do African athletes become products in a wholesale market if they trade their African citizenship for citizenship in the highest-bidding country? Do naturalised athletes who conveniently exchange their talents for passports genuinely belong to any nation? Are they eligible – and if so, according to whom – to wear a country's vest and waive its flag at a global sporting event? Are we witnessing a marketisation of citizenship and does this lead to an inflation of the idea of nationality (Jansen et al. 2018; Shachar 2011)?

A market-driven global athletic system has emerged in which nationality swaps is not a new phenomenon and, according to some, the scale is striking. Both media and scholars (Shachar 2011, 2017) often suggest that athletes *increasingly* trade their most valuable and prestigious asset – citizenship – for medals and national prestige. At the Rio Summer Olympics in 2016, 24 of Qatar's 39 athletes were not born in Qatar. Its handball team of 14 players included 11 foreign-born athletes (Reiche and Tinaz 2019). However, our Sport and Nation research found no evidence of increasing passport swapping. Our data show that, on average, between 8% and 12% of the selected players at the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) World Cup were foreign-born (Campenhout et al. 2019). Despite the public debate – and outrage – of these cases, Jansen and Engbersen (2017) concluded that the number of Olympic athletes born outside of the countries they represent is a reflection of global migration patterns. Moreover, they showed that most nationality swaps include a genuine relationship (thick or *in-between*, where some genuine relation is available) with the country rather than a thin relationship (Oonk 2020). A good example is long-distance runner Kathy Butler, who switched her athletic representation from Canada to compete for Great Britain in 2000. She was eligible to do so because of her dual citizenship, being born to English parents in England and moving to Canada when she was ten years old (Mackay 2001). Jansen and Engbersen (2017) argue that nationality swaps have not increased over the years and that they usually reflect more general migration patterns (2017). In addition, they show that some kind of genuine connection can usually be found in the life stories of these athletes. They may have studied in or married a citizen of that country. From this research, it is clear that nationality swaps resulting in thin citizenship are limited.

However, not only the scale but also the direction of athlete migration is under scrutiny. Poli exposed how the balance in athlete naturalisations on a continental or sub-continental scale was positive for Western Europe (+67), America (+22) and Oceania (+12), while negative for Eastern Europe (–47), Africa (–36) and Asia (–18) (2007, 652). This raises another debate over whether naturalisation is, instead, a zero-sum form of migration. Optimists might argue that capital, knowledge and other gains could be re-transferred to the country of origin, whereas pessimists can argue that such migrations reflect the inequality of the global world system, in which the rich and dominant western countries capture the best and brightest at the expense of other countries. Adjaye makes this point when discussing 50 Nigeria-born athletes who were competing for countries because of the poor incentives, non-payment and lack of training facilities in Nigeria (2010, 34). Darby (2012) makes a similar point in relation to emergence of football academies in West Africa and the export of highly skilled football talent to Europe. Jansen and Engbersen's (2017) research is restricted to a limited number of countries that send or receive migrants, like Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, United Kingdom, Italy, The Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United States. Poli's (2007) main interest is in the migration from the 'rest to the west'. He takes Asia as one entity and does not include the Middle East as a separate and unique region. Darby's (2012) main interest is the relationship between Europe

and Africa. A notable exception in this overview is Adjaye who selected 15 African athletes (mainly from Kenya) to reflect on the African athletes' defections and ambiguous citizenships. From this list, eight athletes represented Bahrain or Qatar, six went to Western Europe and one moved to the United States (Adjaye 2010, 30). What these studies have in common is the lack of focus on the Middle East. One of the few exceptions is the work of Reiche and Tinaz (2019) who recently highlighted the conditions under which countries naturalise foreign-born athletes. Based on Qatar and Turkey, they emphasise the importance of low-participation rates in certain sports, the desire of countries to gain international prestige through sports and the interests of individual athletes for economic and sports-related reasons, such as when it is easier for athletes to qualify for international competitions when representing weak-sport countries.

The starting point of this research is the IAAF list of 695 nationality swaps between 1998 and 2016 (Schulting 2018). As expected, migrant-receiving countries like Canada, the United States and Australia are well represented in this list. In addition, countries like France, Spain, the United Kingdom and Russia accept talented athletes with genuine links from former colonies or ethnic citizenship and cases in which foreign-born athletes marry local citizens. The list also includes the well-known examples of the 61 'plastic Brits' that represented Team Britain in 2012. The very term *plastic Brits* suggests that the Britishness of these athletes is called into question: 'Are some British athletes more British than others?' (Jansen 2020, 40). Nevertheless, Jansen (2020) takes the *plastic Brits* debate as a case study to discuss how the nation's boundaries are discursively drawn, ultimately demonstrating that it was skin colour that created the debate in the media rather than their British links. He shows how established groups like white journalists

are prepared to offer outsiders some form of recognition as nationals provided that they have shown a degree of loyalty and cultural affinity to the nation. So, while athletes themselves might feel that they belong, their belonging also needs to be recognized by more established groups for certain outsiders to be accepted as genuine representatives of the nation.

(Jansen 2020, 124)

In 2016, an 'astonishing forty-four foreign-born athletes' represented the United States (Ekin 2016). These 44 athletes were born in 28 different countries, illustrating the alleged super-diversity of our globalised era from the perspective of a country of migrants, like the United States.

The selection of Bahrain, Qatar and Turkey in this chapter is relevant for three primary reasons. First, these three countries from the Middle East have the highest number of nationality swaps to Middle Eastern countries in the IAAF's list. In addition, unlike the example of the *plastic Brits*, these cases are predominantly examples of thin citizenship, meaning that they have classified as 'citizenship for sale' examples in which there is no prior ethnic nor civic relationship between the athlete and the country they represent. Bahrain represents 46 such cases, Turkey has 32 cases and Qatar has 18 cases in the list. These three countries represent 13.8% of the total number of listed nationality swaps, yet they represent less than 0.12% of the global population (Worldbank 2020).

Second, what Bahrain, Qatar and Turkey have in common is a strong ethnic notion of citizenship. The ethnic definition of citizenship considers ancestry as the most important criterion of inclusion, that is, *jus sanguinis*, or the right of blood. An ethnic definition also entails nation members having a common cultural heritage, language and religion, and the group can be identified unambiguously (Smith 2017). Therefore, it is surprising that these

accepting countries are prominent in the nationality swap list. Usually, these countries share restrictive norms in accepting foreign-born, non-ethnic members as formal citizens. But they have decided to promote sport and boost their sporting identity by allowing foreign-born talented athletes to represent them. Nevertheless, Qatari and Bahraini citizenship laws are even more restrictive than Turkish citizenship law. The latter allows children of Turkish fathers and mothers to become Turkish citizens, whereas Qatar and Bahrain allow citizenship through the father only. Also, it is much easier for foreigners living in Turkey to become Turkish citizens, whereas foreigners in Qatar and Bahrain do not have this option (Campbell 2010; Reiche and Tinaz 2019).

Third, nationality swaps in the Middle East contest historical models of *jus sanguinis* (blood ties) and *jus soli* (territorial birthright) as the predominant markers and symbols of citizenship, belonging and nationality. They offer foreign-born sports talent a passport in return for money and excellent training facilities to promote their countries at international sports events. There is no need for any genuine link of belonging. Therefore, nationality swaps in the Middle East contradict the notion of Europe (or the West) as the only, or at least dominant, option for athlete migration. For some talented athletes, the Middle East is more attractive than Western Europe. Moreover, the case of the Middle East is an extraordinary example of how states and international sports federations, like World Athletics, 'negotiate' national belonging.

The cases of Bahrain and Qatar are particularly striking. Bahrain has two million inhabitants, of whom only 20% hold Bahraini citizenship. Qatar is slightly bigger with 2.5 million inhabitants, of whom 10% hold Qatari citizenship (Snoj 2019). Bahrain and Qatar are both countries of migrants, and most are not citizens. These countries are predominantly built by migrants, including labourers from Asia and Africa as well as expatriates from the West. Neither country has a strong sports tradition, and both have low sport-club membership rates. Hosting and employing international talented athletes to have them represent Qatar or Bahrain at an international level both promotes the countries in the international sphere and sports within the countries. Potential athletes are offered citizenship and salaries in return for medals. In Bahrain, they are requested to change their name to an Islamic name and female athletes are asked to wear a headscarf cover outside of competitions, for example, at press conferences or during meetings with domestic sponsors and sports associations. Despite these requests, 41% of the Bahraini cases were female and have been granted citizenship by special decree from the King of Bahrain. An example is Maryam Jamal, who was born in Ethiopia but granted Bahraini citizenship in 2004. She became the first Bahraini athlete to win an Olympic medal in the 1,500-metre women's race in the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. She originally won the bronze medal, but after the gold and silver recipients were both condemned for doping violations, Jamal received the gold. This was also the first Olympic medal won by a woman representing a Gulf state. Nonetheless, she received criticism from Bahraini lawmakers after a photo of her jubilantly crossing a finish line for a 3,000-metre victory in Oslo, wearing shorts and a sports shirt, was published in the Bahraini newspapers in 2005. This greatly troubled Bahraini legislator Hamad Al-Humhannadi:

We were all shocked by the look of the young woman who was representing Bahrain at the international gathering. The outfit is not in any way related to the normal clothes that Bahraini young women are accustomed to wearing. We are all aware of the mental, emotional, and physical importance of sports, and we want to promote athletic activities. However, we must ensure that they are within the perimeters of Islam and our local traditions.

(Gillingham 2015)

There are no examples of women athletes that acquired Qatari citizenship in the IAAF list. In 2012, Qatar was represented by four women; only one was foreign-born – Egyptian table tennis player Aya Majidi (who is not on the IAAF list we reviewed). It should be noted that the Qatari authorities are more reluctant to accept women in sports than the Bahraini officials.

Turkey provides us with a different context. One major difference between Turkey and Qatar/Bahrain is that Turkey provides full citizenship to its naturalised athletes, whereas Bahrain and Qatar offer only temporary passports (Reiche and Tinaz 2019). Turkey has more than 80 million inhabitants (almost all are Turkish citizens) and a strong sports culture, especially related to football, basketball and women's volleyball. According to the IAAF Lists of Allegiance, the ratio of men to women that has come to represent Turkey in international athletics is 50/50. This also may reflect the laws and regulations that Turkey applies regarding nationality and citizenship. For example, they make no distinction between men and women in the naturalisation policy. In 1998, the Turkish transfers were mainly female athletes who came from neighbouring countries like Russia and Bulgaria. Some of these athletes married in Turkey and thus obtained Turkish passports, therefore becoming eligible to compete for Turkey. For example, Nora Ivanova, born in Bulgaria in 1977, met Turkish high jumper Kemal Güner of Fenerbahçe Athletics during the 1997 World Championships in Athletics in Athens, Greece. After marrying in 1999, she became a Turkish citizen, converted to Islam and adopted the Turkish name Nur Güner, though, she became known as Nora Güner. Even though they later divorced, she continued to compete for Turkey until 2006.

What the Data Tell Us

The data set reveals that 254 out of 695 (36%) transfers of allegiances between 1998 and 2016 are African athletes who transferred to non-African countries. Ninety-six cases (13.8%) involve the countries of Turkey, Qatar or Bahrain (Schulting 2018) (Table 31.1).

Bahrain and Qatar recruited all their foreign athletes from Africa except for three Jamaicans. Turkey recruited more diverse athletes. Nevertheless, Kenya is, by far, the largest supplier of athletes with 35 transfers. There are two interrelated reasons for the dominance of African athletes. First, the payment and excellent sports facilities are appealing incentives for African athletes to relocate to the Middle East. Ethiopia-born Kalkidan Bekkadu, who now represents Bahraini, explained, 'There's so many strong athletes in Ethiopia so it's a challenge to compete, so that's also why I changed' (Mishra, The Tribune 2018).

Sometimes, African leaders try to prevent their home-grown talent from leaving and explicitly ask for 'patriotism' to resist the temptation to change citizenship for financial gains. But as patriotism does not provide food and decent training facilities, this strategy has no chance (Adjaye 2010, 34). Second, all three countries recruit the most athletes from Africa, with Kenya at the top, having lost 35 athletes to Bahrain, Qatar and Turkey. This may be a result of existing transnational networks of coaches and scouts, a system termed *talent pipes* (Maguire and Eliot 2008).

Changing Regulations

On March 3, 1998, the IAAF announced that it will track and publish nationality changes (Bolling 2007; Glad 1998). The publication of a list of 18 professional athlete transfers amounts to a list of transfers of allegiance, recording all nationality changes for athletics each year. The IAAF emphasised that along with the list, codified in regulations, were the requirements an athlete had to meet to compete for a different country. Athletes may still change affiliations,

Table 31.1 National background of athletes in the Middle East in numbers (1998–2016)

	<i>National background of athletes</i>	<i>Number</i>
Bahrain	Kenya	20
	Ethiopia	15
	Morocco	5
	Jamaica	3
	Nigeria	2
	Guinea	1
Qatar	Kenya	6
	Egypt	3
	Sudan	3
	Nigeria	2
	Uganda	1
	Chad	1
	Mauritius	1
	Yemen	1
Turkey	Kenya	9
	Russia	5
	Bulgaria	4
	Ethiopia	3
	White Russia (Belarus)	2
	Ukraine	2
	Jamaica	2
	Cuba	2
	Turkmenistan	1
	Romania	1
	Azerbaijan	1

Data selected by Jorn Schulting (2018). *Migratie en Nationale Identiteit in de Atletiek sport, Een vergelijkende analyse tussen Bahrein, Qatar en Turkije 1998-2016*, unpublished MA thesis, Erasmus University Rotterdam.

subject to the approval of the national federation in their country of origin. The IAAF allowed nationality changes only for athletes who had never played an international tournament (world, continental or regional championships, and Olympic Games). If an athlete had previously represented another country, a transition was only permissible after three years without international participation. After approval of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ sports federations, the IAAF could shorten this waiting period to one year on a case-by-case basis, which happened in most cases where both parties agreed.

These regulations came under pressure when Kenya-born Stephen Cherono received his Qatari citizenship just two weeks before the 2003 World Championships in Athletics and was eligible to represent his new country in the competition. Controversy surrounded the IAAF rules that determined whether this step was justified. It was ruled that since Cherono had not yet represented Kenya in international tournaments, he was qualified to compete for Qatar. He changed his name to Saif Saaeed Shaheen, won the world title in the 3,000-metre steeplechase, and provided Qatar with its first gold medal in a world championship.

In 2004, the IAAF changed the rules again, deciding the period of ineligibility of an athlete who had competed for one member federation and wished to change to another would only begin when the athlete received citizenship. The new regulations intended to avoid cases

like Stephen Cherono's. It was again decided that the three-year waiting period, after a special request and approval from both athletics federations, could be shortened to just 12 months (ABC Australia 2005).

Under pressure from the European and African athletics federations and critical media in these continents, the IAAF included the item on the agenda for the 208th Council meeting in 2017. Under the leadership of IAAF British chairman Sebastian Coe and the chairman of the Confederation of African Athletics Hamad Kalkaba Malboum, new, although temporary, rules for the transfer of allegiance were accepted. This decision resulted in several rules being nullified rather than adding new guidelines and regulations. Beginning in 2019, a country can only be represented by athletes who hold the citizenship of the country through birth or if a parent or grandparent was born in the country. Additionally, athletes can only change their national allegiance when they have received full citizenship of their 'new' country *and* resided there for three years or one year if both federations agree. The residence requirement will also apply to citizenship by marriage. Competing for a country after the athlete has represented another country is not allowed unless he or she falls under specific conditions, such as the disintegration of states (like former Yugoslavia) or being stateless. These new regulations make the transfer of alliance to countries in the Middle East very hard.

It is striking that the 'out of Africa thesis' and 'the best athletes will go to the highest bidder' narrative became the major reasons for the World Athletics, in 2017, to suspend the regulations governing the transfer of allegiance. This meant that from 2017, it was no longer possible for athletes to apply for nationality switches. The decision followed a long period of deliberation on how to address the allegedly growing number of athletes who switched allegiances to other countries. These athletes are sometimes portrayed as mercenaries selling their talents to the highest-bidding country. The World Athletics itself claims that its current rules no longer secure a championship sport based upon national teams. Sebastian Coe, World Athletics' elected vice-president since 2015, commented in 2017:

It has become abundantly clear with regular multiple transfers of athletes especially from Africa that the present rules are no longer fit for purpose. Athletics, which at its highest levels of competition is a championship sport based upon national teams, is particularly vulnerable in this respect. Furthermore, the present rules do not offer the protections necessary to the individual athletes involved and are open to abuse.

(Worldathletics, 2017)

Additionally, Hamad Kalkaba Malboum, the Africa Area Group Representative on the IAAF Council, said:

The present situation is wrong. What we have is a wholesale market for African talent open to the highest bidder. Our present rules are being manipulated to the detriment of athletics' credibility. Lots of the individual athletes concerned, many of whom are transferred at a young age, do not understand that they are forfeiting their nationality. This must end and a new way forward found which respects the athletes' rights and the sports' dignity.

(Worldathletics, 2017)

While neither Coe nor Malboum mentioned Middle Eastern countries, it soon became clear that Bahrain, Qatar and Turkey were on the list of wrongdoers. Journalist and commentator Nick Butler explicitly referred to these countries. He also reflected on comments from

the Asian Games and European Championship that they are increasingly dominated by African runners. Fourteen of the 22 individual running events at the Incheon 2014 Asian Games were won by athletes of African origin who had switched nationalities to Qatar, Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates. There were similar European examples where African born athletes represented Turkey in European Championships (Butler 2017). The impact that African athletes transferring their allegiance to Turkey has had on European athletics is substantial. The European Team Championships, also called the European Athletics Team Championships, is an international athletics competition between European countries organised by European Athletics. It replaced the similar European Cup. Unlike most international competitions, medals are not awarded to individuals in individual events but to the overall winning team based on a points system. Transfers of allegiance to Turkey reached the pinnacle in 2014 when their men's cross-country team won gold in both individual and team events, a stark contrast to ten years earlier when their best finisher was 74th, and their team ranking was last.

Conclusion

Remarkably, the IAAF's eligibility regulations transformed in a relatively short period (1998–2019), from being open, pro-athlete and accepting of flexible citizenship to a stricter and nation-state-oriented focus most common in the West. The thin forms of eligibility mentioned in the thick and thin citizenship model of Oonk (2020) are no longer permissible. This makes it almost impossible for states like Qatar, Bahrain and Turkey to compete at the highest level in the Olympics. It also reduces the chances of (mainly) African athletes to receive a proper income, enjoy the best training facilities and compete at the highest level when they cannot represent their birth country.

It is also noteworthy that this transformation was driven by European and African perspectives, and officials like Coe and Malbourn. They explicitly targeted the Middle East for thin citizenship and representation and not, for example, the nature of college scholarships in Canada and the United States. Regarding college scholarships, it is notable that the 2012 IAAF list contains 18 nationality transfers to the United States, from which seven came from Kenya, three from Ethiopia and one from Nigeria. The list includes Cheboiwoa and Biwot who were talented runners in Kenya and, therefore, eligible for sports scholarships in the United States. They eventually became US citizens. Others gained their citizenship while serving in the United States Army. Paul Chelimo was one of four Army runners to make the US team in 2016. All four were born, raised and started running in the highlands of Kenya. They won athletic scholarships to American universities. After college, they enlisted in the US Army, which is open to non-citizens with legal residency. Their military service had already provided a fast-track to US citizenship.

Middle Eastern countries may, in the future, use similar paths to attract foreign-born talents. They may use the residence rule of three years as amended in the 2018–2019 IAAF regulations. Middle Eastern countries could become a 'team of rejects'. They could provide the world with another example of 'multi-national teams' that represent a state or nation, in effect, symbolising cosmopolitanism. This scenario, then, might come close to the suggestion of Iorwerth, Hardman, and Jones (2014) that sporting bodies should be more pragmatic in their criteria of national belonging. We agree that traditional citizenship requirements are inadequate and outdated when dealing with citizenship in international sports. The case of the Middle East shows that stretching the notion of citizenship and identity in international sports should be more athlete-oriented, increasing options for individuals, rather than nation-state oriented, restricting the options for talented athletes.

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