

Go Development in the Middle East

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Abstract: There is a growing interest in factors that affect the spreading of Go due to a slow but steady increase in the number of IGF members. Few studies have addressed Go in the Middle East. This paper aims at investigating the Go development in the Middle Eastern countries Turkey, Israel, Iran, United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Data from literature and interviews were analyzed regarding the history, the current state, the organization, the strategies, and the difficulties associated with developing Go. The five case studies revealed country-specific characteristics due to differences in Go history and promotion strategies. For example, Turkey and Saudi Arabia mainly target university students, while Iran focuses on cooperation with other sports organizations and training Go teachers, and Turkey and Israel emphasize utilizing the new media. Consequently, the achievements also differ from case to case, such as an increased Go population (Turkey, Iran), professional Go level (Israel), and governmental recognition (Iran, Saudi Arabia). However, all countries share common obstacles, such as limited public awareness of Go, and lacking Go teacher education. The findings indicate that successful Go development can be driven by locals with the support of developed Go countries. Collaborations between Middle Eastern countries, online Go content and Go teacher workshops are needed to accelerate the Go development in the Middle East.

Keywords: Go, Baduk, Weiqi, Go culture, Go globalization, Middle East, Turkey, Israel, Iran, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia.

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I. Introduction

In the history of Go, globalization is a relatively new phenomenon. When the 1st World Amateur Go Championship was held in 1979 in Tokyo, only 15 countries participated; however, this number almost doubled to 29 in 1982, and these countries went on to found the International Go Federation (IGF). Currently, the IGF membership stands at 77 (IGF, 2023).

The International Mind Sports Association (IMSA) was founded in 2005 with the goal of lobbying for bridge, Go, chess and draughts to be included in the Olympic sports (IMSA, 2012). Their efforts paid off when chess, Go and draughts were featured in the Asian Games 2010 and in the Asian Indoor and Martial Art Games 2013 (Hsiang, 2013). However, in the 2014 and 2018 editions of the Asian Games, no board games were included. According to Jeong (2013), the 2014 organizing committee dropped Go partly because “there were too few Asian countries to support Go”. In other words, the low number of national Go organizations in Asia can be seen as an obstacle to including Go permanently in the Asian Games.¹⁾ Fortunately, Go was reinstated in the Asian Games 2022, whereas it is not clear whether the 20th edition in 2026 will follow suit (AINAGOC, 2023). Similarly, the second biggest multi-sport event in Asia, the Asian Indoor and Martial Arts Games featured Go only in 2013 whereas chess has been included since 2007. This raises the question of whether that will change in 2025 when it will be held for the first time in the Middle East (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia). The Olympic Council of Asia will certainly evaluate the Go development in Asia. In other words, the Go development in countries like the Middle East will eventually affect the efforts in getting Go recognized

1) Currently, there are 45 member nations in the Olympic Council of Asia, out of which 19 members have an equivalent Go organization member in the IGF.

by the Asian Olympic Council and the International Olympic Council.

Spreading Go and growing it into an organized activity is not an easy endeavor. In most European countries Go has been officially established by a national organization, as can be seen in the number of 39 EGF members that have joined the IGF as of January 2023. However, in other regions such as the Middle East, Go is still relatively unknown as evidenced by having only three national organizations being members of the IGF. This raises interesting questions as to why the spread of Go across the globe has been so uneven or stagnant.

Game historian Schaedler (2003) noted that Go did not set foot in Europe until the beginning of the 20th century, even though there were scholars who published writings on Go as early as the 17th century. Schaedler concludes that Go was lacking three features that affected the Westerns' attitude towards games: dynamism (fast-progressing and short games), variability (adapting original games to create game variants), and gambling (playing for a stake). Arguably, these limitations no longer exist, so why then is Go still struggling to attain widespread acceptance?

Tan (2019) tried to answer this question by conducting a global survey among Go players and Go associations. 1,035 Go players from 67, and Go organizations from 25 countries participated in the survey, and his findings revealed that the most influential factors promoting Go are the media, friends, and family. The reasons for the low popularity of Go in countries outside South Korea, China, and Japan are a lack of awareness due to the absence of active Go promotion and exposure, as well as the association's financial constraints. Furthermore, Tan analyzed the reasons for regional differences in Go development. However, out of the 15 countries in the Middle East,²⁾ only Go

2) According to World Population Review (2023), the list of countries in the Middle East varies from 15 to 26 entries. The core list consists of Bahrain,

players from Turkey and Israel responded. Therefore more research is needed to build up a better knowledge base.

A few other studies have addressed the Go history or developments in specific countries, such as the U.S.A. (Laird, 2001), Vietnam (Hong, 2010; Linh, 2020), Malaysia (Kim, 2016), or a region such as Latin America (Neubert, 2020). Such case studies are rare, yet they provide valuable findings on regional- and country-specific bottlenecks affecting the spread of Go.

This paper aims at analyzing the Go developments in the Middle East. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed.

1. When and how was Go introduced to countries in the Middle East?
2. What is the current state of Go in these countries?
3. What are the successful strategies, and the obstacles to spreading Go in these countries?

Depending on the level of maturity of Go culture in the countries under study, one or more of the research question(s) will be answered.

II. Research Method

To analyze the development of Go in the Middle East, five countries have been selected, namely Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates, because they were the only ones to report Go activities. First, a literature review was conducted, using data from the national Go association web-

Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.

sites, the Go tournament repository of the European Go Federation (EGF), and news articles. Second, interviews with stakeholders were conducted via Zoom, messenger, or email.

A theoretical framework was utilized to analyze the collected data consistently and systematically. It is based on Jeong's definition of Go diffusion as a process of four steps: (1) introducing Go equipment, and rules, (2) teaching Go techniques, (3) developing the Go culture, and (4) commercializing Go (Jeong, 2013). The adapted theoretical framework in this paper consists of eight categories as listed and briefly explained below.

Go introduction: The game of Go is not widely known outside East Asia. Therefore the first steps of introducing Go are essential.

Organization: Every community needs some kind of structure and leadership to grow and motivate potential members to join. Jeong (2013) addresses this category in the third step of Go diffusion as "introducing a Go system." He argues that establishing and managing Go players' meetings, community, tournaments, a rating system, IT, media, etc. require a comprehensive system.

Education & promotion: Next, spreading Go needs people who explain how it is played, and help them improve their ability. Such educational events or programs can take place in informal (Go club, family or friends) or formal settings. Hsiang (2013) concludes his report on the current state and prospects of mind sports that "the next phase of growth is in the area of education and promotion (···)[which] will ensure the continued growth of the mind sports."

Events: Go can be played anytime and anywhere if you have access to the internet. Nevertheless, sustaining people's interest in Go and building a Go community is greatly enhanced by regular in-person meetings in Go clubs and competitions.

Products: As with every sport and hobby, equipment and publications are needed to support the development of its community. This includes accessi-

bility, costs, and user convenience of Go products. While most equipment is produced in East Asia, a few producers try to accommodate the growing demand in their region and began to create homemade products. The same goes for publications. Here, the language might also play a crucial role in helping Go fans improve their skills and broaden their knowledge about the game.

Support: Spreading Go in a country where it is not native requires a lot of resources and enthusiasm because of lacking playing and teaching equipment and basic infrastructure. Often locals in these countries rely heavily on support from other countries, such as Go teachers being sent for a designated time abroad, or donations in the form of equipment and books. Financial support is also provided in rare cases, such as Iwamoto Kaoru 9p, the Ing foundation, and CEGO.³⁾

Success: Each organization has its aims and strategies on how to promote Go. Therefore there are no ‘objective’ criteria of what could be specified as a ‘success’. Nevertheless, it is expected that there are positive outcomes that are worthy of special mention.

Obstacles: When spreading a ‘foreign’ culture like Go, it is inevitable to encounter various difficulties. Identifying them can help to find countermeasures to overcome them.

The framework described above also serves as a structure for presenting the main findings of this study in the next part.

3) Abbreviation for a Chinese group of sponsors supporting European Go, the official name is Beijing Zong Yi Yuan Cheng Culture Communication Co. Ltd. (EGF, 2013).

III. Results

In this part, the development of Go in the five selected Middle Eastern countries is described, by focusing on the introduction phase, the current situation, successful strategies, and obstacles to spreading Go. The framework of eight categories (introduction, organization, education & promotion, events, products, support, success, and obstacles) was used to structure the description. The results of these five case studies are presented in chronological order of how Go arrived in the Middle East: Turkey, Israel, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

1. Go Development in Turkey

In Turkey, Go is developing rapidly since they started gathering in 1988. Geographically seen, Turkey belongs to the European Go Federation (EGF) which has been recording Go tournaments since 1996. According to the EGF's European Go Database, Turkey has seen 3,130 Go players who played at least once in a Go tournament in the period between 1996 and 2022 and ranks number four among the European countries listed, after Russia (8,871), Germany (6,874), and France with 6,544 Go tournament players (EGF, 2023). The following findings of the data analysis will reveal some reasons for the rapid increase in the Turkish Go population.

1.1. Introductory Stage & Organization

According to the Go historical information on their association's website, the first mention of Go in Turkey was in two scientific journals issued in 1970 and 1971. However, it took almost 20 years until Turkish players Alpar Kilinc

and Mehmet Dardeniz began to play and founded a Go group at the Middle East Technical University (METU), one of the most prestigious universities in Turkey. According to one of the founders, Kerem Karaerkek, the informal gathering led to Kilinc's formation of a Go club that joined the *Turkish-Japanese Friendship and Solidarity Association* since there were not enough Go players at that time, and that association also became a member of the IGF in 1993. Later, when the *Go Players' Association* was established in Ankara in 1995, they transferred the IGF membership to this association. (E. Kurter, personal communication, March 15, 2022) In 1996, they joined the European Go Federation (EGF), and in 1997, the organization was renamed to *Turkish Go Players' Association (Türkiye Go Oyuncuları Derneği, TGOD)*, their logo is shown in figure 1.



Figure 1. Official logo of the Turkish Go Players' Association.
Source: TGOD (2023)

During that important beginning stage of Go in Turkey, a tragic incident took the lives of two founding members, Alpar Kılınç and Cem Kendi. Every year the Alpar Kilinc Memorial tournament is held in the founder's honor.

In the 2000s, the Turkish Go community expanded throughout the country. New Go groups were founded in Ankara at Bilkent University and Hacettepe University, as well as at Istanbul Technical University and Galatasaray University in Istanbul. Furthermore, the first Go clubs were established outside the capital Ankara and their largest city Istanbul: in 2004 in Bursa and Izmir, followed by Eskisehir in 2005. The current president of the TGOD, Eren Kurter,

points out the impact of university Go clubs (E. Kurter, personal communication, January 18, 2023).

“I think that the most important reason why Go has become widespread in Turkey is the student clubs at universities. The education process and exams in Turkey from childhood to university entrance unfortunately cause children and young people to not show much social and cultural diversity. However, after entering the university, students who are partially relieved begin to explore student societies to get to know themselves, socialize and learn new things. In this process, Go clubs at universities play an important role in reaching these students.”

Kurter describes the positive role Go clubs play in the students’ lives as well as in the Go community that needs to recruit new members to grow. Husrev Aksut, adds on that by stating that he considers university Go clubs, city Go clubs, and the Turkish Go Players’ Association as the biggest impact factors on the growth, at least until the last decade (H. Aksut, personal communication, January 23, 2023). He mentions another factor that affected the Go development in Turkey in the last decade, as discussed below in the part ‘support’.

1.2. Education

Turkish Go teachers instruct people of all age groups at various institutions, such as schools, universities, Korean cultural centers, and companies. At the center of these educational offers are individuals and institutions, such as Mehmet Emin Barsbey, who founded the Istanbul Go School in 2011 and teaches mainly children – reportedly 133 students last period, and Eren Kurter who has been offering Go courses at the two most prestigious Turkish universities Hacettepe University and Atılım University, where 60-125 students enroll every semester, depending on the quota he sets. Currently, he is also doing some aca-

demical research related to Go. As shown before, Kurter emphasized the impact of Go courses at the university level on the development of Go in Turkey:

“(…) [S]ince 2016, the Go course has been added to the elective courses program at Hacettepe University Faculty of Sport Sciences, one of the best universities in Turkey (…). The Go course, which has become one of the credit courses that students must complete to graduate, has been a very important development for the systematic and programmatic introduction and dissemination of Go. (…)

My biggest advice to countries that want to promote and spread Go is to start from universities, as in our country. Also, if I need to mention another advantage of having Go clubs in universities, there are usually problems in finding affordable/free and large venues for tournaments. Universities provide great convenience at this point.”

While attending university Go clubs is completely voluntary, official university courses require the students' commitment to some extent for a whole semester. Furthermore, teaching Go at university can be seen as a type of formal, systematic education. On top of that, universities are excellent cooperation partners as they allow to use their facilities on the weekend for a low price.

In addition to these in-person teaching, two online Go schools were opened after the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. One of their teachers, Husrev Aksut, reports firsthand:

“The first one is Taşlı Yol Go Okulu (<https://gookulu.tasliyol.com/>), created by three top players and close friends (Özgür Değirmenci, Altan Kuntay, and me). We organize online leagues (like Yunguseng Dojang) and give private lessons. But it is less active after the start of face-to-face events. There is less demand for online stuff.

The second one is Şibumi Go Okulu (<https://sibumigookulu.com/>), created by Hataycan Özgür, who is the only teacher there. The format of this school is very similar to Taşlı Yol Go Okulu.”

1.3. Events

In Turkey, Go is developing rapidly since they started gathering in 1988. Despite a stark decline in the number of Go tournaments and tournament Go players since the COVID-19 pandemic started, 18 Go tournaments were held in 2022. The largest one was the 28th Alpar Kilinc Memorial at the end of the year which attracted 130 Go players.

Thus it does not come as a surprise that the EGF database reveals a steady increase of Turkish Go tournament players in number and strength. As shown in figure 2, before 2004, the number of registered Go tournament players in the EGF database was less than 30 per year, partly because Go results were not reported to the EGF before 2002 – even though Go tournaments were held at that time. The continuous increment of Go activities significantly helped grow the local community, as evidenced by 208 participants at the 24th Alpar Kilinc Memorial held in Ankara in 2017, and a total of 758 Turkish Go tournament players in 2019 just before the pandemic began. That can safely be named the biggest increase in the annual number of tournament players in the EGF within such a short time. Having a broader base, the overall level also improved, as can be seen in the number of 32 dan players who played in 2022. However, they face a limit when it comes to the strongest players as only three Turkish players have achieved the Go strength of 5 dan yet (as of January 2023). Nevertheless, this case study is showing how the Go population can increase rapidly despite a short history of fewer than 35 years.

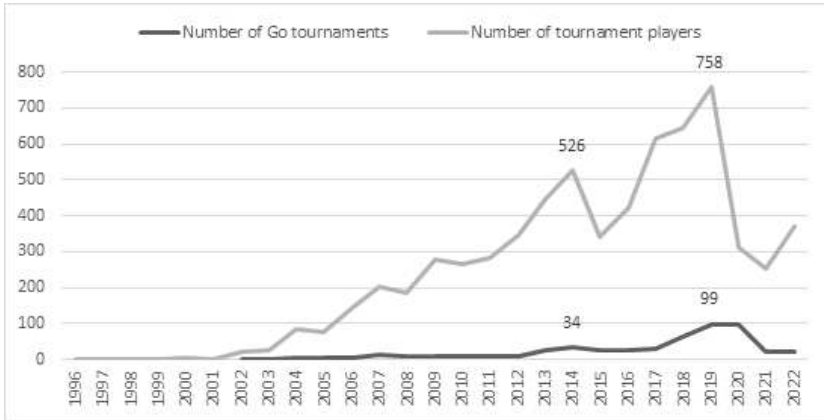


Figure 2. Annual Go Tournaments & Participants in Turkey (1996-2022).
 Source: EGF (2023)

1.4. Products

In many countries spreading Go is hindered by a lack of basic equipment, such as playing tools, and teaching & learning materials. In contrast, in Turkey, you can buy Turkish Go equipment of diverse sizes at a wide range of prices. Barsbey explains how he as a Go teacher and promoter produces Go equipment as a side job (M.E. Barsbey, personal communication, January 19, 2023).

“I don't have a factory, but I cooperate with some factories. For example, ordering stones from a producer, working with a print office for boxes and booklets, and producing Go boards with some other suppliers. Finally, I design and bring the Go set together.”

On top of his productions, there are also game suppliers who offer Go sets on the internet. According to Barsbey, you can find a variety of Go equipment in online stores but most of them are cheap and not standard Go equipment, such as smaller-sized stones. In addition to the quality, Barsbey points out another difficulty, which is the high entry barrier for beginners:

“Without any help, they don't understand the game and stop playing. Many Go sets are just waiting on bookshelves at homes without any use.”

Therefore, he rather not recommends beginners buy a Go set in the beginning. He elaborates that digital tools can replace the physical Go set and also lower the difficulty at the beginning of the learning process.

“If they play with a Go program, at least they cannot break the rules such as illegal moves or ko capture. If two beginners play against each other at home they just get lost.”

Barsbey points out that the category ‘Go products’ should not be limited to physical products such as Go equipment and publications but should also refer to digital tools that are available anywhere anytime, and many of them even for free. These features might indeed help lower the entrance barrier for new Go players.

1.5. Support

Turkey has received support from various sides. When asked what had a significant impact on developing Go in Turkey, Barsbey immediately responded with “the internet!” He elaborated on the reasons why the internet has helped the Turkish Go community at the beginning of the 21st century:

“If you are just a few hundred players in a 60 million country and mostly low-level kyu players, then the internet is a big help to practice, study, as well as to communicate and promote the game. For example in Korea, Go is an old and traditional game. In Turkey, it is a new game without almost any background and institution.”

For many Go players, the internet is seen as the reason for local Go clubs losing

members due to the convenience of playing Go online. In contrast, Barsbey emphasizes the positive effects of the internet, such as using websites and social media to inform people about Go in general, as well as announcing events and educational programs. On his school's website and Facebook page, there are regular updates on recent activities and his appearances in the press. For institutions and parents that must be an essential and reliable information source.

Aksut talks about foreign support and why it had an impact on developing Go in Turkey:

“(…) probably collaboration with Asian countries/associations. Especially in the last decade or so, we had many Korean professionals come to visit Turkish Go Camps, tournaments and give workshops, etc. Besides, the Korean Cultural Center and Korean Embassy in Ankara had sponsored several events in Turkey.”

Kurter also mentions the role that foreign support has played in Turkey:

“(…) as a result of the support of the Embassy of the Republic of South Korea and the Korean Cultural Center, we started to organize the Korean Ambassador Youth Go Championship every year and as a result of this organization, which we realized with a large budget, unlike other tournaments we usually organize with low budgets, we were able to reach many young players with this budget. We were able to get young people to take a lot of Go lessons thanks to this. I cannot help but thank the Korean Baduk Federation and the Korean Amateur Baduk Federation for their unwavering support in all these processes I mentioned. They have never left us alone in terms of professional players visiting our country and providing training and materials.”

In short, the interviewees mentioned the following supporting factors: universities, new media, and their national organization, in addition to the help they received from foreign institutions such as the Korean Embassy, Korean Cultural Center, Korean Baduk Association, and the Korean Amateur Baduk Federation.

1.6. Success

When it comes to describing the success, the big growth of the Go community in a brief time is worth mentioning. Association president Kurter describes it like this:

“We currently have around 3,000 active players participating in tournaments, while we estimate that around 15,000 people across the country know the rules. These players are between the ages of 5-65. Our strongest player is at the 5-dan level, but we have a lot of young and strong dan-level players just below it. Unfortunately, we do not have a professional Go player from Turkey, I think the biggest reason for this is economic. Alper Sulak, who came in 2nd in the under-12 category at the European Youth Go Championship held in 2022, and his friends are our best hope to find our professional player.”

Even though Turkey's strongest players have not reached the top level in Europe yet, the broad base they have kept building is very promising, e.g. the nine-year-old Alper Sulak 1 dan who shows promising results in national and international Go tournaments.

1.7. Obstacles

Despite the undoubted success of developing Go in Turkey, they also face obstacles. Kurter mentions the pandemic that surely affected all countries,

“(…) although we return to our activities with the cessation of bans and reopening, we are still far from our rapid rise before the pandemic. In addition, the economic crisis in Turkey due to various reasons has made the participation of intercity tournaments very difficult.”

However, in addition to the pandemic and the economic recess in Turkey, he also points out the lack of professionalization of Go in Turkey:

“(…) [U]nfortunately the people who have graduated from university cannot spare enough time. However, financial support should be arranged for people who can promote Go in the country as soon as possible, because, on a voluntary basis, progress can only progress to a certain level. I think this is the main reason why Turkey has not yet reached the level we want, unfortunately, we could not create someone whose main job is "Go" due to the lack of financial support from the state. It is not right to expect people who work for Go voluntarily - often spending money from their own pocket - while working in various jobs to earn a living.”

Aksut points out two obstacles to overcome in Turkey:

“For introducing Go to new people, I think the biggest obstacles were the lack of Go equipment, materials, teachers, and so on. For bringing top players to higher levels (we have many low-dan players, but no players in the top 100 in Europe, only 3 players in the top 200), the biggest obstacle was not having strong teachers (pro or top amateur) like in some European countries and having very limited opportunity to join European tournaments and congresses due to visa requirements and economic reasons.”

In sum, Turkey’s case study has revealed that the steady increase in the Turkish Go population can be linked to their efforts in education (university, children), a growing number of Go clubs and events, collaborations with local universities as well as foreign organizations, and the internet as a medium and tool to easily reach a wider audience. The analysis also indicates that economic, social, and political environmental factors (economic recess, pandemic, visa restrictions), as well as internal shortcomings (lacking professional or top amateur players) have been slightly restricting the development of Go in Turkey.

2. Go Development in Israel

We will begin with the history of how the Go association was formed, the challenges it faced, and the various methods it used to overcome them.

2.1. Organization

Go history in Israel began in 1996 when a small group of Go enthusiasts founded the Israeli Go Association (IGA). Their official logo which is displayed on its website and promotional materials is shown in figure 3. The association became a member of both the EGF and the IGF in 1997.



Figure 3. Official Logo of the Israeli Go Association. Source: IGA (2023a)

Former executive member Elad Zipper (2019) described the beginning stage of their organization as follows:

“In the beginning the association was tiny, there was only a single club in Rosh HaAyin city with the founders as its only members, the founders had a bit of connection with the local municipal government, and they used it to have a presence in local events and expand the community. (...) [In] 2004, the first official Israeli Go Championship took place with 36 players, it is an impressive number for a new association and an unknown game, even today the Israeli Association doesn't have those numbers.”

Soon after, in 2006 there was a surge in interest because of the Japanese anime “Hikaru no Go”. In that year, the number of Israeli Go Championship participants jumped to 68 players. Current association president Fragman commented on the Go boom (A. Fragman, personal e-mail communication, January 16, 2023).

“Hikaru No Go was one of the accelerators during the 2006 period in which over 10,000 people bought Go sets and that was the biggest bloom of Go in Israel. Out of those people, our national team consists of many players who started in that period.”

However, this success could not be sustained beyond 2006 because there were not many Go activities organized in Israel. All this changed in 2012 when a group of people, led by president Ofer Zivony, took the initiative to replicate the successes of 2006. Zipper (2019), an executive of the Israel Go Association at that time, described their strategy to revive the Go association as follows:

“The answer is to build a big core of players that will make the Go community an unseparated part of their lives and once it is there it will be much easier to attract other players and even new players to step in becoming part of the community. (···) The first thing we have done is trying to make more tournaments each year.”

Despite opening more tournaments and making them more accessible for their members, the participation rate did not change much. Therefore, Zipper set up a Facebook page in 2014, which soon proved to be a more powerful tool to inform Go players about the existence and activities of the association, currently there are 700 followers (IGA, 2023b).

Next, emphasis was put on socialization among the Go players to make the big audience they reached via the Facebook page engage and become core mem-

bers of the Israeli Go community. According to Zipper, they tried to organize more Go tournaments to allow Go players to meet each other more often. His next idea was to set up a group chat in a messenger application:

“I’ve tried opening a Whats App group for everyone, people can become friends more easily if they communicate with each other daily. The results were promising, over time many players joined the WhatsApp Group and became friends, shared life and death problems, played games together, and had many casual talks, and the most important thing is that each tournament had at least 25 players.”

Their strategy of utilizing social media has been expanded, nowadays the Israeli Go Association updates their official website (IGA 2023a), their Facebook page (IGA, 2023b), a Facebook group page (2023c), in addition to using WhatsApp group chats for each Go club.

After their success in growing the number of core Go players, they set a new challenge – reaching out to new potential Go players. When analyzing typical Go players in the Western world, they concluded that “they are usually people who like science, computers, games, books, and anime.” Therefore anime, Sci-Fi, fantasy, and board game conventions became a new platform for them to introduce the game to a new audience.

“We decided that having a presence at those events is a key to the development of the Go community. It turns out that even though they enjoy learning and playing Go at those conventions, they usually don’t want to become part of the Go community. The main reason is that they found their group of friends and they don’t need any replacement or alternative. So far we managed to reach out to more existing players than making new ones.”

Zipper summarized their efforts in reaching out to inactive Go players and how Facebook and WhatsApp helped them to reach that goal. On the other hand, he also described their difficulties in attracting new Go players. Fragman

describes the current Go population in Israel as follows:

“Our community consists of 500 people who are involved with Go. Out of them around 100 participate occasionally in tournaments. Regarding strength - our community is slowly growing therefore it is getting stronger. And the age of participants - for a few years we do not have enough youth playing. At the moment, only one youth player is participating in tournaments.”

2.2. Education

In the above description of the Go development in Israel, we can see that there were few promotional or educational activities held. Perhaps it is worth mentioning that the association has also a YouTube channel with a few videos that explain basic rules as well as commentary on games of strong players.

When asked what advice president Fragman would give to countries that only recently discovered Go, he answered:

“Invest in young players and invest in excellent players. Make as many tournaments as possible and make sure professionals are attending.”

Based on his experience in Israel as well as visiting and competing in Go in other countries, he emphasizes that education, events, and professional lectures are important means of developing a solid base of Go players and continuous growth in strength.

2.3. Events

The European Go Database allows us to get a quick overview of the Go tournaments held in Israel between 1996 and 2022 (figure 4). In 2004, the first annual Israeli Go Championship was held, practically the only tournament until

2012. In that period, they witnessed the Hikaru-No-Go effect and a total of 70 players competed in the championship. However, before then the top Israeli Go players joined Go tournaments abroad, such as the annual World Amateur Go Championship held in Japan.

As described by Zipper, the Israeli Go organizers increased the number of Go tournaments to seven in 2017 and 2018⁴⁾ which increased the number of tournament participants to 86 in 2018. However, the number fell to 58 players when only four tournaments were held in the following year. Since the start of the pandemic, face-to-face tournaments have been limited causing the number to fall further to 35 in 2022.

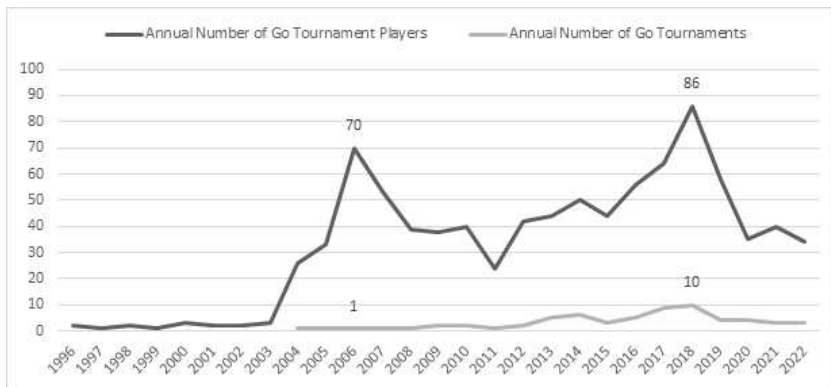


Figure 4. Annual Go Tournaments and Participants in Israel (1996-2022).

Source: EGF (2023)

2.4. Support

According to Zipper, in the first years, the Go organization had connections to the local municipal government, which helped grow the Go community in

4) In the European Go Database, the annual number is higher than the actual number of 7 because the preliminary group stage and finals of the same tournament are counted as two events.

the beginning stage. Zipper resumes, “Maybe we should consider putting a bit more priority [in re-establishing] municipal connections.” On the other hand, Amir Fragman describes the supporters of Israeli Go as follows:

“Yes, we had support from the EGF, the Japanese, Korean and Chinese embassies, and cultural centers – in a few ways,

- a. a place to play our tournaments,
- b. equipment donations, and
- c. events produced by them which include professional players and professional players sent by national associations.”

2.5. Success

Despite its short history, a small Go population, and low Go tournament activities, they can take pride in their Go talent Ali Jabarin who learned Go at the age of 12 in 2006 and turned professional in the very first European Go pro qualifiers in 2014. More surprisingly, he is a ‘home-made’ professional as he had studied mainly in Israel to achieve that level, except for a relatively short six-month training time in South Korea. After becoming a professional, he also enhanced his level in China and was promoted to 2 dan in 2018. Another well-known top player is five-time Israeli champion Amir Fragman 6 dan, the captain of Israel’s team in the Pandanet Go European Team Championship and current president of the Israeli Go Association. According to Fragman (2017), he learned to play Go at the age of ten from his father, Shavit Fragman, who used to be the association’s president in the past and is still active in promoting Go.

2.6. Obstacles

Zipper has already discussed a couple of difficulties they faced when trying to grow the base of Go players. Amir Fragman added:

“Unfortunately, Go is not as popular as other games. People do not know it and therefore are not as willing to send their kids to extracurricular activities.”

Both Zipper and Fragman address the problem of the low awareness of Go among the Israeli population.

In summary, Israel’s case study revealed a surprising rise of two top players Jabarin 2p and Fragman 6 dan despite a relatively small community. The Israeli Go Association is proud of its top players' achievements and yet struggles with expanding its existing community. Using social media like Facebook and WhatsApp somewhat helped make the association’s activities more popular, their biggest challenge yet is to promote Go to a wider audience and integrate them into their community. Presenting their local stars’ international successes in the media might contribute to building more awareness of Go in public and inspire young learners to follow their role models.

3. Go Development in the Islamic Republic of Iran

3.1. Introductory Stage & Organization

Information on Go in Iran is scarce due to its short history. The Baduk Association of the Islamic Republic of Iran (BAIRI) was founded just 13 years ago in 2010, and its official logo is shown in figure 5. They received active support from the Asian Go Federation (AGF) in 2014 when AGF president Seo

Daewon and secretary-general Kim Dalsoo visited the association headquarters and met with the Iranian Vice Minister of Sports to emphasize the importance of officially recognizing Iran's national Go organization by the Ministry of Sports (N.N., 2014). When Iran applied for IGF membership in 2015, they reported 18 Go clubs, 500 members, and 100 Go tournament players. The association president Miram Amidimehr stated that the number had increased to more than 1,000 Go players, including 200 Go teachers (M. Amidimehr, personal communication on March 10, 2022). When doing a follow-up inquiry in January 2023, secretary-general Manouchehri reported that they had more than 2,000 Go players in Iran now (M.G. Manouchehri, personal communication, January 15, 2023). When asked about the success of Go in Iran, he replied:

“52,000 athletes are working under the cover of my organization in Iran called the Humanitarian Games Association. (...) In fact, Iranian humanitarian games have several Iranian national associations that have been recognized by the Ministry of Sports and the National Olympic Committee. Therefore, our extensive relationship with athletes from various National Sports Associations made Go to be known in Iran very quickly and its members increased. Although the technical level of Go players in Iran is not advanced and professional. But countless people in Iran are playing Go now. (...) I am also a board member of the World O-Sport Federation (WOF). At O-Sport, we have mind sports, artistic sports, combat sports, and obstacle sports.”



Figure 5. Official Logo of Iran's Go Association.
Source: BAIRI (2023).

3.2. Success, Support, and Obstacles

The key to Iran's successful development can be seen in embedding Go in a professional umbrella sports organization that would allow the small Go association to utilize synergistic effects by joining and organizing competitions together with other sports and thus profit from their publicity effect. Furthermore, Go was recognized by the government, in other words, their promotion activities are subsidized by governmental funds.

In an interview during the Korea Prime Minister Cup 2012, the vice president of the organization, Shirin Mohammadi (IGF, 2012) talks about their early development and the difficulties they faced in Iran:

“(…) we now have an enthusiastic group of young people who are playing the game, but we lack someone to teach them. They can only learn from printed matter and the Internet. (…) But you can't improve rapidly just by playing on the Internet. (…) What we really need is for some professional players to come to Iran to teach. It should be someone who is good at teaching and can communicate in English.”

Mohammadi also addressed the foreign support they received:

“The Korean Baduk Association has been extremely helpful, donating sixty Go sets, for example, and making it possible for me to come here (…)”

In contrast, Manouchehri (personal e-mail communication, January 15, 2023) did not recall any recent assistance from foreign countries in spreading Go in Iran:

“We now have more than 2,000 Go players in Iran. However, no country has helped us so far and we are developing Go in most countries of West and Central Asia, we spend a lot of money as well as time. For example, we have set up an organization for Go in Oman and have asked Oman's O-sports community to join the Go family. I am currently doing this in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar,

Afghanistan, and Pakistan. We have entered the field of Elite/championship and serious competition in the West and Central Asian region (a total of 19 countries) and Iran is growing rapidly as the center of this region. I am ready to go to Saudi Arabia and share my experiences with them and train and develop Go there.”

Notably, the enthusiasm for spreading Go in Iran has even motivated Manouchehri and his team to initiate Go introductory meetings in neighboring countries and thus act as Go ambassadors. He finished the interview with a statement that summarizes his passion for Go:

“Anyway, we love Go, and we are trying to be one of the most developed countries in the world Go family.”

Both Manouchehri and Mohammadi wish for additional support from other countries to assist them in spreading Go in Iran and other Asian countries. At their general assembly in 2022, the Asian Go Federation (AGF) recognized Iran’s efforts in spreading Go beyond their own country and approved Iran’s plan to establish a Central and Western Asian Regional Office of the AGF in Iran, as well as to host the AGF Championship in Iran in 2023 (O-Sports, 2022).

In summary, Iran’s Go story has revealed that spreading Go does not require a long history or geographical proximity to its origin. A small group of people who evaluate Go as worthwhile spreading combined with the idea of utilizing the expertise and resources of a bigger professional umbrella organization is showing great results in Iran, such as governmental recognition, more than 2,000 Go players, and 200 Go teachers. Governmental funds as well as training Go teachers to spread Go to a wide audience seem to pay off. Additional external support can help accelerate the effectiveness of their efforts in promoting Go in Iran and other countries.

4. Go Development in the United Arab Emirates

4.1. Introductory Stage & Support

In January 2022, the Japanese newspaper Mainichi reported on a Go promotion event at the World Exposition in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (N.N., 2022). It was the first time that the Expo, one of the largest fairs in the world, was hosted in the Middle East. Due to the pandemic, the delayed Expo 2020 opened in October 2021. Perhaps inspired by the Expo's theme “Connecting Minds, Creating the Future”, the Nihon Ki-in sent a four-person team to promote Go with the goal to “generate interest and encourage participation in this challenging and entertaining game,” as stated in the event announcement.



Figure 6. Expo visitors learning Go. Source: Goto Shungo

The hands-on activity as shown in figure 6 was held from 2021 December 9th to 12th led by Tsukuda Yuko, the owner of a Go salon in Japan and organizer of the Japan Go Congress 2017, Goto Shungo 9p of the Nihon Ki-in, and Chinese Li Ting 1p of the Kansai Ki-in who has been living in Austria since 2010. Li Ting is proficient in five languages: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, English, and German, and thus perfectly prepared for an international audience. Tsukuda Yuko's eldest son Miyagishi Ryu also joined to assist Li Ting in ex-

plaining the Go rules to visitors. Besides learning the rules, the participants could also practice with Japanese professional Cho U's Go application, and play their first game in the exhibition halls. The four-day promotion event was a great success as it saw as many as 450 participants from 16 countries - where else does Go enjoy such exposure? Tsukuda Yuko commented, "They say they will share the joy of Go when they return to their country." Figure 7 displays a group picture of the teaching team at the Expo in Dubai.



Figure 7. Expo Go teaching team (from left to right Li Ting 1p, Goto Shungo 9p, Tsukuda Yuko and Miyagishi Ryu). Source: Li Ting (2021)

The next expos will be the Expo 2023 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and the Expo 2025 in Osaka, Japan, which will provide another excellent stage to promote Go to an international audience, as Goto Shungo commented: "We went to Dubai to sow seeds for the World Expo in three years." Perhaps Latin American Go organizations can also utilize their network and offer Go workshops at the Expo in Argentina as a catalysator for reaching a wider audience.

In summary, Go has been introduced only recently to the United Arab Emirates with the help of a small team sent by the Nihon Ki-in to the grand-scale international event Expo 2020. Go was presented there as part of

Japanese culture, and 450 visitors experienced it first-hand guided by amateur and professional players. Follow-up activities are needed to build a local community and eventually an organization dedicated to promoting Go in the United Arab Emirates.

5. Go Development in Saudi Arabia

5.1. Introductory Stage, Support & Obstacles

In February 2022, Kim (2022) reported on Go development in one of the oil-rich countries, Saudi Arabia. In 2019, a group of researchers at King Abdulaziz University conducted a research project on mind sports that could enhance the lives of Saudis. They encountered Go in the process; however, the project leader, Prof. Majed Alharthi, and his team did not know much about the game.

He explained how he encountered Go (M. Alharthi, personal communication, March 3, 2022).

“In one of our meetings, we discussed mind sports and how they can help to give students some skills like critical thinking, memorizing things, making decisions, something like that. So we ended with the approach to promote mind sports in general. Then the first step was, let’s do a study on the current situation of the mind sports: what are the very important mind sports and that can help [achieve] our goal, that can help our students to get those skills.”



Figure 8. Go workshop in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.
Source: Kim (2022)

In December 2019, Alharthi traveled all the way to Rochester, USA to consult Prof. Thomas Hsiang, secretary-general of the International Mind Sports Association, about the most important mind sports. After this meeting and their study, Alharthi's research team decided to include chess, Go, and bridge in their project. As part of his working visit, he also went to the National Go Center in Washington DC to learn the basics of the game for two days.

His avid interest in Go stems from the fact that the Saudi Arabian government has proposed a billion-dollar program called "Quality of Life" which is part of the bigger "Vision 2030" that aims to shift the country away from its oil dependency and improve the citizens' living standards. Based on the results of their research, Alharthi's team recommended the Saudi government promote mind sports (chess, bridge, and Go) as part of the "Quality of Life" program, and the government agreed. In other words, Go is now officially recognized as educationally valuable in Saudi Arabia, and all the teaching and promotion will be covered by the government. Alharthi shared what arguments they used to convince the government to include a foreign mind sport like Go that is un-

known in Saudi Arabia:

“I told you about that study we did, and [we found that] they use that Go game in schools in Korea. There are many institutions in Korea, Japan, China, and the United States, they have institutions for Go, so it is not a limited game, it is an international game. That means this game is very interesting and very good as a mind sports game. (···) In the study that we did, we found that students can improve their skills in many ways if they play Go.”

The next steps were taken in January 2022, when they invited Korean professional Kim Myungwan to Riyadh to teach them the basics. He provided an eight-day Go workshop to 12 selected participants on how to play and teach Go (figure 8). The hope is that each of these participants will spread the game in their local communities. Alharthi describes their promotion strategy:

“In the beginning, we thought university students [would be a good target]. After we did our research, we found that it might be better for elementary school students. However, our colleagues are all at university, so we first target university students. But we can expand it, no problem.”

Despite their success to convince the government that promoting Go is worthy of governmental subsidies, they also face some difficulties:

“Awareness. We need more awareness to promote Go. When we announced the Go training, a limited number of people came. That means they don’t know about Go and they are scared of Go. They may see it in some animations or cartoons sometimes, but I did not see it before. (···) The other challenge is··· Actually, it is an easy game. The people we trained, they can teach Go, but they cannot teach it like experts.”

Alharthi addresses the necessity of continuous training for Go teachers in order to enable them to teach the game effectively and systematically.

In summary, the case study of Saudi Arabia has shown that the initiative to introduce Go came from local academic researchers who successfully integrated Go into a huge government program that aims at enhancing Saudi citizens' lives. The professional introductory workshop for aspiring Go teachers in January 2022 was a promising start. Yet, there are few Saudis who can teach the game to their current main target, university students, or children. Since they are beginners themselves, they need more teacher training to improve their Go techniques as well as Go educational skills. In addition, the lack of awareness of Go in Saudi Arabia is another challenge they face as Go is completely new to their country.

IV. Discussion and Conclusion

In this paper, the developments of Go in the Middle Eastern countries Turkey, Israel, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia were analyzed based on a framework of eight categories. The major findings were as follows.

1. Go Introductory Stage

In Turkey, the first informal gathering of Go players was held in 1988 which catalyzed the formation of an umbrella organization in 1993, and in 1995 this organization metamorphosized into what is now the Turkish Go Players' Association. A very similar history is shared by the Israeli Go Association, where the casual gatherings of Go enthusiasts led to its establishment in 1996. In Iran, the Go players formed a national organization in 2010 which was recognized by their government as a sports organization in 2014, and by the IGF

in 2015.

Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia currently lack national Go associations. However, they have received help from amateur and professional Go players from other Asian countries in the form of workshops to teach the basics of Go to a selected few. It is unclear whether the participants have disseminated their knowledge to the local population.

2. Current State

In Turkey, there are about 3,000 Go tournament players, and 15,000 people know the Go rules. The strongest player is 5 dan, and in 2022, there were 15 face-to-face and three online tournaments held. Turkey is one of the few countries where Go is taught as a course at two renowned universities in addition to Go clubs at several universities. These achievements can be seen as a huge success considering their relatively short-lived Go history of 35 years.

In Israel, there are about 100 active players who play in Go tournaments, and 500 people know how to play. Their top players are Ali Jabarin 2 dan pro and Amir Fragman 6 dan. In 2022, three face-to-face tournaments were held, and 34 players participated.

In Iran, there are more than 2,000 Go players and 200 Go teachers. However, it is unclear whether all of them are active or not. Once a year the national Go championship takes place under the auspices of the Iranian Go association which is recognized by the Iranian government as a sports organization.

The information about Go in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia is too limited to evaluate the current situation.

3. Successful Strategies & Obstacles

For each of the case studies, the level of Go development and success story is different. The advances made by Turkey can be attributed to the building of a broad base of Go players using strategies such as exposure at universities (Go clubs, elective courses, tournaments), lowering the entry barriers (supply of homemade inexpensive Go equipment, educational programs for all age groups), cooperation with institutions (universities, Korean culture center, etc.), utilization of new media to reach a wide audience, and foreign support (professional visits, equipment donations, etc.) On the other hand, their limited top players' level (5 dan), a lack of a professionally-run organization (i.e. over-reliance on volunteers for promoting the game), economic recess, and visa restrictions were identified as barriers to further development.

In the case of Israel, they have managed to produce one professional and one strong amateur player, both of whom are listed among the top Go players outside of Asia. This achievement is linked to their early interest in the game combined with intensive individual training. The Israeli Go Association has partially succeeded in increasing and sustaining a small community by utilizing social media. In addition, a temporary increase in the number of tournaments to seven per year also helped to rise the annual tournament participation. On the other hand, the following barriers to spreading Go were identified: the lack of awareness of Go in general society and the lack of youth Go programs.

For Iran, their steady increase in the number of Go players to 2,000 is a success although it is not clear whether these players only know the rules or are active players. The key to their success is attributed to the relatively high number of Go teachers (200 out of 1,000 Go players in 2021) and their ability to use the synergistic effects of different sports disciplines, such as incorporating Go in the World Obstacle Federation (WOF) and the Humanitarian Games

Association. In addition, it is remarkable that they have already started to spread Go to other countries in the Middle East. If these initiatives are successful, then the growth of Go in the Middle East will be accelerated by new opportunities such as Middle East Go championships and friendship exchange matches, much like what countries in South East Asia have experienced. Two major obstacles were identified: the lack of continuous support from foreign countries and the lack of strong players to teach Go at a higher level.

In the case of the United Arab Emirates, it is too early to talk about successes or failures because their only well-known exposure to Go was at the World Expo held in 2021. This example has shown that short beginner-friendly workshops or experience events can lower the entrance barrier. It is unclear what the long-term impact was, however, using established events such as conventions, exhibitions, and multi-sport events can be seen as a great way to increase awareness of Go in public. Hopefully, they will build on the momentum from the Expo and organize casual meetings regularly that eventually will lead to establishing an organization.

Saudi Arabia shares quite a similar story to the United Arab Emirates. However, they have committed one part of a billion-dollar government budget to promote Go as a way to improve the lives of Saudi citizens. If a steady increase in the game is effectively combined with the communication of its benefits, Go might become more popular in Saudi Arabia. The obvious obstacles in spreading Go are the lack of awareness of Go in public, and the lack of Go teachers and expertise as only one Go workshop was held for a few participants.

4. Conclusions & Implications

In conclusion, the five case studies have revealed similarities and differences. Even though (1) they share similar obstacles such as a lack of awareness of Go in public, the lack of professionally trained Go teachers, and the lack of funds to professionally operate a Go organization, (2) each of the five selected countries in the Middle East have developed their unique distribution strategy, such as targeting university students, training Go teachers, using the internet and social media to raise awareness, collaborating with other institutions, and receiving support from other countries. Naturally, (3) their achievements also differ from case to case, such as a quantitative increase in the Go population (Turkey, Iran), expertise (Go professional in Israel, Go teachers in Turkey and Iran), and official recognition by the government in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Therefore, instead of relying on a one-size-fits-all solution, it is perhaps better to admit the differences in the level of development as well as environmental factors (political, economic, cultural) and find tailored solutions.

Based on the findings, a few implications can be drawn. (1) Exchange between Go developing countries in the form of teacher workshops, competitions, and friendship matches might help them learn from each other, share their expertise, and combine their efforts in spreading Go inside their country and beyond. (2) It is wishful that support from countries like China, Japan, and Korea will continue to assist local Go players in overcoming difficulties in spreading Go, by providing equipment donations and professional assistance that not only strive to improve the Go level abroad but also equip local Go teachers with the necessary expertise to teach Go effectively. (3) Cost-effective methods like developing multi-language online content for beginner learners, as well as offering online workshops for Go teachers are also expected to benefit Go development.

5. Limitations

This study was exploratory and therefore is limited in its ability to explain all factors that have an impact on Go development in the Middle East. In addition, at the time of this study, only data (some very limited) from five Middle Eastern countries were available to the author, and thus general statements about Go development in the Middle Eastern region are not possible. In-depth follow-up studies using up-to-date data which are sanctioned by authorized institutions are needed.

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