

Sport, Palestine, and Israel

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Introduction

The sport dynamics in Palestine/Israel are characterized by an interesting paradox. Among both the Zionist and Palestinian national movements, institutional sport has historically emerged as a nationalist project aimed to bridge intra-national cultural/communal differences and to rehabilitate a collective self-image which suffered from humiliation and subjugation. However, the sport sphere in Israel/Palestine has rarely become an explicit ethno-national battleground. It has not provided unforgettable moments of national conflict, of the kind provided by India–Pakistan cricket, by the United States–Soviet Union hockey games during the Cold War, or by soccer games in the Basque and the Catalan regions in Spain.

There are two reasons for that; one is self-evident, and the other needs much more elaboration and is the focus of this chapter. The obvious reason is that because the level of hostility and mutual denial between Israelis and Palestinians is so strong, sport encounters between formal representatives of the two sides have been uncommon. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict is popularly seen by both sides as a total and a zero-sum conflict, and for many years the mere recognition of

the legitimacy of the other's collective identity has been out of question. So far, the only time when official representatives of the State of Israel and the Palestinian national movement have met in the sport sphere was in the 1972 summer Olympic Games in Munich, when members of the Israeli Olympic team were taken hostage and eventually executed by Black September, an organization affiliated with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

In one context Jews and Arabs do meet each other on a regular basis. Jewish and Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel (the latter number about 1.3 million people, 17 percent of Israeli citizens) do share the same sport sphere. In this context, however, another dimension to the paradox is added. The more “warlike” and masculinist the sport is, the more Arabs in Israel are represented and also successful in it. One would expect that overrepresentation and success of a discriminated minority in combative sports would lead to the emergence of figures like the boxer Muhammad Ali, an opinionated and vocal athlete who used his status to promote political protest (Saeed, 2002). But this is not the case. A unique combination of social, political, and economic forces has “depoliticized” Arab–Jewish athletic

encounters within Israel and partly isolated them from the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The nationalist connotations are blurred, and rarely do these encounters become an explicit Israeli–Palestinian battleground. In this chapter I follow the historical development which has led to this depoliticization and suggest a solution to the double-layered paradox.

The Gramsci-inspired literature in the sociology of sport has highlighted the dialectic of sport as a political sphere. Sport is seen as a contested terrain, which can be potentially used by both the state and by subjugated groups to promote their interests (Hargreaves, 1986; Hartmann, 2000; McKay, 1991; Sugden and Bairner, 1993). This dialectic can also be found in the case of sport among the Palestinian citizens of Israel. As a general tendency, however, the potential for sport to be a stage of protest and resistance has rarely materialized.

In order to understand the political role of sport in Israel/Palestine, one should first conceptualize the conflict itself, a task which usually exposes the political sympathy or affiliation of the scholar. In this chapter, I refer to this conflict as a struggle of a native population against a settler-immigrant movement and at the same time a struggle between two national movements. From this point of view, Zionism is both a national movement (an aspect that is evident from its discourse and practices aimed to mobilize national identification among Jews) and a colonial movement (an aspect which is evident from its political practices toward the native population of Palestine). Sport, as an institution that has been used both to mobilize national identification (Ehn, 1989; Houlihan, 1997; Lever, 1983) as well as to stabilize and legitimize colonial control (Jacob, 2005; Mahlmann, 1988; Mandle, 1979; Mangan, 2001; Nauright, 1997; Sugden and Bairner, 1993) is a sphere in the conflict that is usually underestimated.

Before dealing with the above-mentioned paradox we need first to briefly describe the essence of the conflict with a focus on the development of sport until 1948. Since 1948 the Palestinians have been dispersed in different countries and lived under different political conditions and therefore the pre-1948 outline is followed by a separate discussion for each of these contexts. The political role of sport is most evident in the

context where Jewish Israelis and Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel do encounter each other regularly in the sport field, and therefore a more detailed analysis is dedicated to the ways sport has shaped and reflected the relations between Jewish and Arab citizens of Israel. Finally, I evaluate the possible contribution of sport for Israeli–Palestinian reconciliation.

Sport in Zionism and the Palestinian National Movement

“The conflict” is an historical clash between the Zionist movement and the Palestinian people. Respectively, both Zionism and the Palestinian national movement have been shaped to a large extent as a reaction to collective existential threats and collective humiliations. For Jews as a discriminated and persecuted minority in Europe and the Arab Palestinians as a colonized population, sport has been a way to rehabilitate their collective self image and especially to redeem threatened manhood through nationalism.¹

The Zionist movement was a European Jewish reaction to the emergence of ethnic national movements in Europe in the nineteenth century. The discourse of ethnic nationalism emphasizes cultural homogeneity and the Jews found themselves frequently as the “ultimate other” of these movements and suffered persecutions. Having been rejected by the European nations, some Jews were looking for alternatives such as emigrating to the New World or adopting universalist ideologies like Marxism. At the end of the nineteenth century a minority was attracted by the idea that Jewish people should establish themselves as a separate nation and, following the emerging European model, to set up a national state of their own – a solution that became known as Zionism.

At least in Western Europe, this new development was accompanied by a growing interest in sport, as a tool for developing national consciousness. As several scholars of Zionism and sexuality have shown, the way in which early Zionist leaders saw the body of the European Jewish man reflected a remarkable internalization of contemporary anti-semitic stereotypes and pseudo-scientific literature, which depicted the Jewish male body as inferior and drew similarities between the physiology of Jewish men and female

bodies (Biale, 1992; Boyarin, 2000). Therefore, Zionism strove to redeem the Jewish man from his “femininity” by “converting” him into “an Aryan man.” The “sportization” of the Jew was seen as a cure to his non-masculine character. In his extensively quoted speech from 1898, the Zionist leader, Dr Max Nordau, called for the establishment of a “Muscular Jewry” and emphasized the link between national redemption and masculine rehabilitation: “We shall develop a wide chest, strong limbs, a courageous look – we will become a people of valor. Sport is educationally significant to us, the Jews, for not only do we have to recover physically, but also spiritually” (Israel and Forman, 1994). The names given to Zionist sports clubs, for example, reflected the yearning for mythological muscular warriors found in the Jewish ancient past: for example Maccabi, Shimshon (Samson), Bar-Kokhba, and so on (Kaufman and Bar-Eli, 2005: 180).

Although Zionist thinkers considered several territorial options for gathering Jews to establish their own state, traditional and religious motives drew the Zionist movement to Palestine (the “Land of Israel” in Jewish tradition). At the turn of the twentieth century, Palestine had a population of around 700,000, the great majority of which was Muslim Arab. Christian Arabs numbered around 72,000 and Jews around 60,000 (Campos, 2010: 12–13).

The Arab national movement appeared almost at the same time as the Zionist movement, initially confronting the Ottoman empire and later the colonial regimes founded in the region at the end of World War I. In 1917 the British empire promised to support the Zionist movement’s efforts to establish a national home for the Jewish people in Palestine. The British conquered the country shortly after this, and initially enabled Jewish immigration to Palestine. The Zionist immigrants and their declared plan to establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine alarmed the native Arab population and gradually led to a direct resistance. As a reaction to the Zionist immigration and land purchase, a separate Arab Palestinian national movement emerged (Khalidi, 1997; Kimmerling and Migdal, 1993; Muslih, 1988; Porath, 1974).

The British authorities noticed the Arab frustration, and their initial sport policy was shaped by it. Sports were considered by the Mandatory

government as a mechanism that might promote inter-ethnic cooperation between Jews and Arabs (Ben Porat, 2001) and invited both Arabs and Jews to join sports competitions they organized. Arab and Jewish athletes did play in the same associations during the 1920s but separated in the early 1930s, a separation which served the nationalist agenda of both sides. For both Zionists and Arab Palestinians, sports organization at this point served as an organizational as well as symbolic platform, which was especially important for a stateless national movement.

The Arab Palestinian sport movement in the 1930s and 1940s was an integral part of the nationalist movement (Sorek, 2007). The constitution of the Arab Palestinian Sport Association established in 1944, for example, explicitly prohibited the participation of Jewish players. The Zionist football association (officially named Palestine Football Association) kept inviting Arab clubs to join its ranks, in order to keep its recognition by FIFA as the official representative association of the country. Like the Zionist sport movement, the nationalist-masculinist character of the Palestinian sport movement was exemplified through youth sports teams that were named after historically renowned Muslim and Arab military commanders, such as Khaled Ibn al-Walid and Sallah al-Din al-Ayubi. The rhetoric of the newly born Arabic-language sports media frequently emphasized the militaristic functions and meanings of sports.

Furthermore, the sport–militarism connection on both sides went beyond simple rhetoric. The physical education of the Arab and Jewish youth was intended to train the young generation for combat. Among the Jews, in 1939, following the Arab Great Revolt,² the National Committee established the Department for Physical Training, with the explicit aim of training Jewish youth to protect settlements. This department had significant personal and organizational overlap with the existing Jewish sport infrastructure in Palestine.³ Among the Arabs, some sport clubs in the mid-1940s were used to prepare Arab youth for a military conflict with the Zionists (Levenberg, 1993: 126–154).

As the conflict intensified in the region, and with the resounding impact of the Holocaust of European Jewry, the United Nations decided in 1947 to divide the country into two states, Jewish

and Arab. Most of the Zionist movement accepted the partition resolution, convinced that the crucial issue was to establish a firm foundation for Jewish sovereignty. The Arabs, on their part, could not understand why they should pay the price for crimes committed against the Jews by Europeans, and violently objected to the plan. In the subsequent 1948 war, Palestinians lost their modern urban centers on the coast, hundreds of villages were destroyed, and around 750,000 Palestinians were uprooted, became refugees, and were not allowed to return to their home (Morris, 1987). This series of events is remembered by the Palestinians as the *Nakbah* (catastrophe) and it is the central pillar of contemporary Palestinian national narrative. The State of Israel was established in May 1948 and during the war expanded its territory to 78 percent of Mandatory Palestine.

The 1948 war created a new sociopolitical reality with far-reaching implications on sports institutions. The effect of the war on Palestinian sport (as on Palestinian society generally) was devastating. In 1947 dozens of Arab Palestinian sports clubs were active, most of them in cities. The large-scale destruction of the war and the forced exile of urban elites brought an end to almost all the sports clubs that flourished in the territory that became Israel. Following the war, the Palestinians were divided and lived under different sovereignties: Jordanian, Egyptian, Israeli, Lebanese, and Syrian. Their sporting activities in the first two decades after 1948 reflected the interests and strategies of the different governments who controlled their lives. The level and form of inclusion/exclusion of Palestinians in the sport organizations in every country has been a very good indicator for their status of (or lack of) citizenship.

Palestinian Sports under Jordanian and Lebanese Rule

Following the 1948 war, about 380,000 Palestinian refugees settled in the West Bank and about 70,000 arrived on the eastern bank of the Jordan river, both of which areas were then under Jordanian control (Jordan officially annexed the West Bank in 1950 and lost it to Israel during the 1967 war). Unlike other countries that absorbed the

Palestinian refugees, Jordan granted citizenship to most of them and implemented a "Jordanization policy." As a result, the Jordanian policy toward sports also derived from aspirations to promote cultural unity after the drastic demographic transformation following the 1948 war (Khalifeh, 1986). Palestinian refugees were prevented from reorganizing sports clubs with a potent Palestinian character (Sayigh, 1997: 52) but were encouraged to integrate into the Jordanian sports organization. These efforts intensified after "Black September," the Jordanian-Palestinian civil war in 1970, as Jordanian-Palestinian soccer encounters became highly tensioned and sometimes violent (Brand, 1991: 183; Massad, 2001: 256–257). It is unclear to what extent this policy was successful in the field of sport, but the existing evidence suggests that Palestinians in Jordan tend to express collective national pride in the soccer sphere, through their flagship team, *al-Wihdat* (Tuastad, 1997).

Only about a quarter of the 100,000 Palestinian refugees who arrived in Lebanon received citizenship. On the one hand, the Palestinians in the refugee camps were not allowed to join the Lebanese sports organization. On the other hand, with severe restrictions on their employment, housing, and movement, and a prohibition on establishing independent organizations in the camps, they were very limited in developing their own sports infrastructure. It was not until 1969 that Palestinians were allowed to establish institutions and organizations to serve refugees, following the Cairo agreement.⁴ As a result of this agreement, the PLO embarked on a campaign to establish a number of such institutions and organizations, including sports clubs (PRRN, 2007). However, most of the 23 sports clubs that existed in 2001 did not have any playgrounds or proper coaches.

Sports and Arab-Jewish Relations in Israel

After the 1948 war, approximately 160,000 Palestinians remained under Israeli rule and today they number about one-sixth of Israeli citizens. This is the only context where Jews and Arabs have shared the same sport sphere since 1948. This context, therefore, is the most interesting for a sociological examination of sport in the

conflict, since it provides an important field for investigating the political role of sports.

As Palestinians by their ethno-national identification and Israelis by citizenship, the Palestinians in Israel face persistent predicaments regarding their sociopolitical location and self-presentation for several interrelated reasons. First, historically, Israel as a Jewish state was established in 1948 on the ruins of the local Palestinian society – and this historical association is the major anchor of Palestinians' collective memory and national identity. This zero-sum-game narrative makes the holding of both self-identifications, Palestinian and Israeli, extremely challenging; therefore, diverse strategies have been developed to solve the dissonance (Bishara, 1999). Second, Palestinians in Israel face contradictory expectations on the part of Israeli Jews and by Palestinians outside Israel. While their Arab Palestinian identity places them in the position of “an enemy within” for the Jewish majority, they are simultaneously considered suspicious – “Israelified Arabs” – by Palestinians outside Israel. Third, but no less important, as Arab citizens in a state that defines itself as Jewish, they suffer from prolonged forms of discriminatory policies in diverse spheres (Haider, Awad, and Mahmoud, 2010). They are systematically excluded from the major political, economic, and social centers of power in the state, their culture and language hold an inferior status in Israeli public life, and they are alienated from the exclusivist Jewish Zionist symbols of the state. At the same time, they do not see any realistic political alternative to the current situation. A viable Palestinian state does not exist, and a return of the Palestinian refugees which will transform the demographic balance in their favor is unlikely to occur. In addition, with all the above-mentioned deficiencies they still enjoy more political freedom and economic opportunities than any other Palestinian group in the Middle East (i.e., refugees in several countries and Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip) and even than most Arab citizens in neighboring countries. These contradictions further complicate questions of belonging and identification. This multidimensional complexity must be taken into consideration when we analyze Arab sports in Israel.

A cursory examination of the involvement of the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel in the sport

sphere might create the impression that sport is a site of ethno-national protest. This is because the branches of sports in which Arabs have achieved significant presence and success are those sports that legitimize a higher level of aggression toward the opponent. Furthermore, these are the exact same sports that the Israeli authorities initially intended to discourage Arabs from playing, out of concern that they would serve as a platform for the development of national consciousness (Sorek, 2007).

Modern sport is based on maintaining a delicate balance between the pleasurable “de-controlling” of human feelings of excitement on the one hand and the maintenance of a set of checks and balances to keep those emotions under control (Elias and Scotson, 1994). Sports allow and legitimize the expression of aggression (de-controlling), and at the same time sports regulate that aggression by a set of previously agreed rules. In ethno-national conflicts, and especially when these conflicts involve severe forms of discrimination or are embedded in colonial and postcolonial contexts, this dialectic of modern sports is translated into a tension between the potential of sports to serve as a platform for anticolonial, ethnic, or national pride and the pacifying potential of the ethnically blind discourse, which makes sports a potential sphere of integration and suspension of protest. Different sports are located differently on this controlling/de-controlling continuum. As a rule of thumb, in the State of Israel the closer a sport is to the de-controlling edge of the continuum, the higher the presence of and success of Arab citizens in it.

The two most popular sports in Israel, basketball and soccer, illustrate well this phenomenon. Basketball was among the games the Israeli military government (in effect between 1948 and 1966) intended initially to encourage (together with volleyball, track and field, and table tennis), while soccer was “not recommended” (together with wrestling, boxing, weightlifting). From the governmental point of view, the “dangerous sports” included combative and warlike sports – exactly those sports which were the most desired for oppressed men who needed them to compensate for their political subordination (women as rebels were probably less of a concern).

This policy, if it was ever seriously implemented, completely failed. In the long term, it is

exactly in the “dangerous sports” where Arab men became extremely overrepresented, or even gained complete dominance. Arab men in Israel are underrepresented and unsuccessful in basketball. An Arab team has never played in the first division, the Israeli national team has never included an Arab player, and the total number of Arab men teams officially registered in the Israeli basketball union is only 24 (out of 228 teams, around 11 percent).⁵

Soccer, however, represents the opposite pole. More than one-third of the men’s soccer teams playing in the Israeli Football Association represent Arab towns, villages, or neighborhoods. Furthermore, over the last decade Arab teams have gained a stable presence in the first division and in 2004 an Arab team, Ittihad Abna Sakhnin, won the Israel State Cup and represented Israel in Europe in the following season. Interestingly, this tendency is reversed among women. Arab women are overrepresented in basketball (21 out of 110 teams, or 19 percent),⁶ and underrepresented in soccer (one team out of 17, or 6 percent).⁷ These invert tendencies might represent the masculine image of soccer in Israel as opposed to the more gender neutral image of basketball and the differential implications of these images on those who hold the political power as opposed to the subjugated and colonized minority.

Arab men are overrepresented as well in other sports, which were “not recommended” for Arabs by the Israeli government in the early 1960s. As early as 1959, an Arab weightlifter ’Ali Khudruj from Acre, was the first Arab athlete to win an Israeli national championship. In subsequent years, ’Ali and his brothers ’Adnan and Muhsin, dominated Israeli weightlifting. The Arab domination in weightlifting diminished later with the influx of immigration from the Soviet Union, but it still exists in other “masculinist” sports. For example, among the 57 Israelis who held a black belt in traditional karate in 2009, 23 (40 percent) were Arabs.⁸

But the most striking example is boxing, a sport located on the edge of the controlling/decontrolling of violence spectrum since it literally legitimizes punching the opponent in the face. Starting in the 1980s, Arabs gained complete domination in boxing in terms of participation, achievements, and representation in administrative positions. In the 2005 championships, for

example among the 460 participants more than half (234) came from clubs representing Arab towns, in addition to 75 (16 percent) which came from clubs representing mixed towns and cities.⁹ Furthermore, between the years 2001 and 2004, 40 out of 52 (77 percent) championship titles for male seniors were won by Arab boxers.¹⁰ The Israeli Boxing Association is the only sport association whose offices are located in an Arab town, which usually organizes its major competitions in Arab towns, and which has Arabs as chair and general director.

The intriguing aspect of this overrepresentation in physically violent sports is that it is rarely translated into explicit expressions of political protest or ethno-national confrontations. Palestinian flags are an extremely rare vision in the Israeli boxing sphere. Active Arab boxers avoid any Palestinian nationalist statement and the Arab administration of the Israeli Boxing Association maintains an Israeli patriotic tone in the media (Sorek, 2009). The question is, if Arab citizens are attracted to these physically intense sports, why are articulations of ethno-national protest absent from the sports sphere?

Modernity and Sport: Muting the Protest

With the establishment of the State of Israel sport activities were seen by the state authorities as a tool for forging an Israeli national identity, enhancing the ties between Israel and the Jewish diaspora, and promoting Israel’s image in the world (Harif, 2011). Sport had the potential to overcome a fundamental paradox in the Zionist ideology: the founding fathers of this movement and the leading political parties have been secular, and at a certain point even anti-religious with the explicit aim of secularizing Judaism (Avineri, 1981), but the most stable common ground for Jews from different continents and cultures was religion. This tension intensified during the first decade of the state’s existence while the Jewish demographic in the country drastically changed with the absorption of mass Jewish immigration from Muslim countries, an immigration which ended the almost exclusive European character of the Jewish population in the country until that time. Promoting national pride through sport

was one strategy of the secular elite to bridge the cultural differences between Jews while bypassing the religious–secular question.

The Arab Palestinians who remained under Israeli rule after the 1948 war and received a nominal Israeli citizenship were not the target audience of the efforts to shape an Israeli national identity. In fact, during the first decade of the State of Israel it is difficult to identify a coherent policy toward this population (Bauml, 2001; Robinson, 2005), except a suspicion and fear that was expressed in the imposition of a strict military rule which severely curtailed their freedom of movement, speech, and livelihood (Jiryis, 1969; Lustick, 1980). The humiliation of Arab men who were defeated in the war was multiplied by the loss of significant tracts of their land, which before 1948 had been an important element in the masculine self-image of peasant men (Katz, 1996).

A major principle in the policy of state authorities in the 1950s and 1960s was to prevent the emergence of a nationalist consciousness among the Arab Palestinian minority, and to attempt to develop a non-Palestinian local Arab identity for the new, unwanted Israeli citizens. The development of state-dependent sports clubs was one expression of these efforts. Hence, after 1948, sport in Israel was not only assigned the role of rehabilitating the image of Jewish men and consolidating a modern Hebrew national identity but also was used as a mechanism to facilitate the control and surveillance of the Arab Palestinian minority.

The Arab Palestinian population who remained under Israeli rule was mainly rural, with significant parts of it previously somewhat detached from the Palestinian sporting movement. Israel became the sponsor of sports, which grew to be an element in a set of strategies through which the state presented itself as a facilitator of modernity. The state functionaries, or more precisely, the functionaries of the Histadrut (General Federation of Labor Unions), who were assigned by the government to encourage the establishment of sports clubs in Arab villages, took advantage of the opposition of the elder rural leadership to the game in order to emphasize their image as the bearer of modernity. This Arab Palestinian leadership did not welcome the idea of youth playing games like soccer. At best, they considered the

sight of barely dressed young men purposelessly running around after a ball a waste of time, and at worst as a licentious, “unmasculine” activity.

“Modernity” is a key concept for understanding the lure of the game and the power relation between the state and the Palestinian citizens. Modernity is a powerful discourse which plays a specific role in colonial contexts (Mitchell, 2000), and sports is an important element in the production of this discourse. The representation of sports as “modern” and their association with certain political agents enabled the accumulation of significant political assets.

The adoption of sports has been a strategy of delineating the border between the modern and the traditional. This association between sports and modernity was used by the Palestinian elite in the pre-1948 period to promote a secular Palestinian national identity. The institutional development of modern Palestinian sports was tightly connected to the “discourse produced by modernity about itself” (Delanty and O’Mahony, 2002: 6). Namely, sports, in the eyes of certain parts of the Palestinian elite under British rule, were a significant component in a “cultural model of modernity, the basic normative, symbolic and aesthetic structures underlying societies that consciously aspire to become ‘modern’” (Delanty and O’Mahony 2002: 6).

After 1948, sport as a badge of “modernity” was used by the agencies of state in order to present themselves as modernizing agents. For men of the younger generation, masculine sports provided an outstanding opportunity to rehabilitate their collective self-image. Sport has a wide and flexible range of interpretations, and while for the elders the game was “play” (and therefore associated with childhood and immaturity), for the younger generation it provided an opportunity to test their masculinity in competition, shortly after their people suffered a catastrophic and humiliating defeat in the war. This nexus of masculinist-nationalist pride was embedded in a prevalent discourse about body and modernity which has emerged in the region since the late nineteenth century (Jacob, 2005; Schayegh, 2002). Following colonial penetration, this rhetoric incorporated explicit consideration of the relationship between national success and physical culture (Jacob, 2005: 126–156), to some extent as a reaction to images of masculinity

produced by the colonizers, in which the native's male body was described as weak and undisciplined (p. 122). Therefore, before 1948 sport's assumed power to cultivate modernity in Palestine made it a necessary tool of both nation-building and anticolonial struggle.

This meaning of sport enabled an ad hoc alliance between the Israeli political establishment and the young men in the Israeli-ruled Palestinian towns and villages. Both were interested in developing Arab sport but for different reasons: the latter to support self-image, and the former for control. Particularly since the early 1960s, Arab sport clubs in Israel were spreading. Although initially it was considered a dangerous game from the point of view of the authorities, soccer's popularity was too strong to defeat and therefore the game was encouraged, as long as it was under the complete control and supervision of the state. Israeli authorities considered the new clubs a useful antidote to nationalist consciousness and deliberately encouraged and supported them if they played under the official umbrella of the Zionist sports organization. Independent Arab sports organizations were banned and quickly dismantled if they appeared. Under these circumstances, soccer and boxing became a safe ground for Arab men to display a combative, quasi-nationalist masculinity (Sorek, 2009), which did not involve the risk of confrontation with state authorities.

Paradoxically, by muting their expression of nationalist aspirations, or by relegating them to other spheres, Arab male athletes were able to simulate a war against Jewish men. For Arab sport fans in the late 1960s, identification with successful Arab soccer players or boxers, even if they played for Jewish teams, could reinforce masculinity and national self-respect. These identifications did not risk the potential sanctions involved in identifying with other heroes, such as the Fatah movement¹¹ which was beginning to gain momentum at exactly the same time.

The military government was officially removed in 1966 (and paradoxically was exported immediately to the territories occupied in 1967) and Israel in its pre-1967 borders experienced a period of relative liberalization in many spheres of life, especially from the 1980s. The disciplinary power of the state, however, was soon replaced by market forces. The accelerated commercialization

of some sports, mainly soccer, since the early 1980s (Ben Porat, 1998) has significantly contributed to the pacifying role of sports. The liberalization of the public sphere meant that an Arab athlete who wished to protest would no longer risk legal sanctions or harassment by the security forces. This protest, however, had the potential to prevent him from gaining a place in the roster of a leading Jewish club or in the Israeli national team. This, in turn, might lead not only to direct loss of income but also to less exposure to European agents and hinder his or her chance of a lucrative European athletic career.

It was only in the 1990s, with the proliferation of an independent Arab press, the relative liberalization of the Israeli public sphere, and the growing confidence of the Palestinian elite inside Israel, that an explicit combative nationalist discourse was attached to Arab sport in Israel. Since the mid-1990s it has become more common to find in the Arabic press warlike metaphors to describe Arab–Jewish encounters in the sports sphere, sometimes with concrete reference to events from the Arab–Israeli wars. Still, it seems that there is a gap between sport journalists, who are more educated than the average fan, and the set of symbols that are actually visible in the stadiums. Palestinian national symbols are mostly excluded from the sports site (even though they have not been illegal since 1993). In addition, violent outbreaks in Arab–Jewish encounters are not more common than with other competitions (Arab–Arab or Jewish–Jewish), statistics which testify that “sport as a substitute for war” is too a simplistic as a theme for describing sport dynamics in Israel.

While Jewish working-class soccer fans sometimes aspire to intensify the national conflict in soccer stadiums, Arab soccer fans are in a more ambiguous position. Soccer is indeed an opportunity to “beat the Jewish men” in a physical competition. But it is also a unique opportunity for Arab citizens to obtain integration and acceptance by the Jewish majority. It is a sphere that glorifies a meritocratic ethos and therefore offers players some protection from the discriminatory practices they face in many other spheres of Israeli society. Therefore, Arab fans manage their confrontation with Jewish fans with great care.

This does not mean that Arab–Jewish tension is absent from the soccer stadium but that Arab

fans and players tend to under-articulate it. Toward the end of the 2011–2012 soccer season, for example, Israeli soccer fans could watch on their TV an Arab team from Nazareth letting another Arab team from Lyda win 6–0 in order to help the latter to climb to the Premier League.¹² This case of Arab solidarity against Jewish teams reminds us of the undercurrent of tension that does exist below the surface of the integrative rhetoric on the bleachers. At the same time, we have evidence that the integrative and conservative orientation of the sport sphere in Israel exists beyond the rhetorical level. It is illustrated in the results of a survey I conducted in 2000 with a representative sample of young Arab men in Israel (Sorek, 2007). It was found that Arab men who attend the soccer stadium are more likely to vote for Zionist parties in the election and less likely to feel proud of their Palestinian identity. These results imply that any planned attempt of the authorities to manipulate the collective consciousness of citizens by sports has gained some success.

During the first decade of the twenty-first century Arab–Jewish relations in Israel deteriorated drastically (Smooha, 2010). Toward the end of the decade even the soccer field witnessed a slight increase in the frequency of appearance of Palestinian national symbols. Still, a Palestinian flag is an exception that attracts the Hebrew sports media and is covered with a magnifying glass. Only time will tell if we are witnessing the beginning of a change in the political role of sport in Israel.

Palestinian Athletes in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip

The meaning of sport as a mechanism for “limited inclusion” became even clearer after the 1967 war. In this war Israel occupied more territories and imposed its control over the Palestinians in these territories, including the Gaza Strip (which was held until 2005) and the West Bank.¹³ The Palestinians in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have never been considered as potential Israeli citizens, and therefore have never been invited to join the Israeli sport associations under any conditions. The only place where Israeli authorities were involved in organizing sports competition was

in East Jerusalem, a territory that was officially annexed to Israel without international recognition. The Israeli municipality of Jerusalem has been involved in developing some sport projects for youth, and a small number of athletes have participated in Israeli competitions.

In the other parts of the 1967 occupied territories, the Palestinians have competed only in their separate athletic frameworks. Under Israeli occupation a separate soccer league for the West Bank was established in 1977 and later on a separate boxing federation. The Palestinian Olympic Committee was recognized as a member of the International Olympic Committee in 1995 and Palestine has been represented in the Olympic summer games since 1996. In 1998 the Palestine Football Federation was recognized by FIFA and the Palestinian national team has been playing in official international games since then. The important aspect for our discussion is that these frameworks have included almost only Palestinians from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and has rarely included Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel.

Although the Palestine Football Association hired for the national team a Palestinian coach who was a citizen of Israel and a former player in a Jewish Israeli team (the late Azmi Nassar) it was clear to everyone involved that Arab soccer players from inside Israel would not be invited to the team. According to FIFA rules (which revere a classic discourse of modern nationalism) throughout his or her career a soccer player can play for only one national team. For this reason Arab players who already played in the Israeli national team could not be invited. Even for those who have not played in the Israeli national team there is a strong incentive to refuse an invitation to the Palestinian team, since playing for Israel would increase their exposure to European player agents. Whatever would be the reason for it, the separation between Palestinian athletes from inside pre-1967 Israel and those from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is clear, and it becomes even clearer among the top athletes. This separation adds another dimension to the “Israeli” orientation of Arab athletes inside Israel.

At the same time, there is evidence that Israeli soccer has, or at least had in the past, followers among Palestinians in the West Bank and the

Gaza Strip, although it is hard to estimate the extent of this phenomenon. This interest goes back to the time period between 1967 and 1992, when the significant part of the Palestinian male labor force was employed inside pre-1967 Israel (in its peak, over 40 percent), was exposed to Israeli daily life, and learned Hebrew. A striking illustration for the construction of sport as an ex-territorial sphere, where conflict is not allowed to penetrate, can be found in Dan Setton's documentary movie *Shaheed: The Making of a Suicide Bomber*. Based on an interview with Palestinian prisoners who were sent on suicide bombing missions in Israel, this film examines the justifications they give for their readiness to sacrifice their lives. One of the interviewees, Rashid Saker, a would-be suicide bomber in an Israeli jail, was talking about his interest in Israeli soccer.

QUESTION: Had you were [sic] requested to commit your mission in a soccer stadium, in the Teddy stadium in Israel, for example – what would you have done?

ANSWER: In the soccer stadium I couldn't have done that.

QUESTION: Even though these are Jews, Zionists, and infidels?

ANSWER: I couldn't have done it.

The documentary does not go further, to explore the reasons for Saker's reluctance to kill Israeli fans and himself in a soccer stadium, but it is clear that soccer has a special symbolic value for him. As a Palestinian who was employed in Israel, Saker might have been exposed to the same forces that shaped the attitude of Palestinian citizens of Israel toward the game. Namely, soccer might have symbolized a hope for normality, an island of egalitarian relationship between Jews and Arabs. While Saker imagined the fans in the stadium they might have looked too similar to him to be enemies who deserve to die.

Sport and Reconciliation?

Sport has not become a field of explicit nationalist confrontation between Jewish Israelis and Arab Palestinians, even though in a specific context they do share the same sport sphere. The

case of sport among the Arab Palestinian citizens of Israel is a good illustration of the way sport might contribute to the maintenance of hegemonic structures and ideas, through its ability to generate ethnically blind discursive elements. Even though there is ample evidence that national frustration and humiliation play an important role in the attraction of the Palestinian citizens of Israel to the sport sphere as fans and athletes, their frustration remains frequently muted and is heard mainly outside the sport sphere.

Consequently, over the past decade several initiatives to promote peace between Jewish Israelis and Arab Palestinians have been launched. The most extensive and best-known program, Football for Peace, is run by the Chelsea School of Sport at the University of Brighton, the German Sport University Cologne, the British Council, and the Israeli Ministry of Culture and Sport (Sugden and Wallis, 2007). The program brings together Jewish and Arab children to practice and play football, and its declared aims are to "provide opportunities for social contact across community boundaries; promote mutual understanding; engender in participants a desire for and commitment to peaceful coexistence; and enhance sports skills and technical knowledge about sport" (Sugden, 2010).

Since Jewish and Arab children have so few opportunities to interact, one should not underestimate the potential positive contributions of this program. At the same time, we should evaluate the possible political implications of it based on what is known about the history and the contemporary role of sport as a site of depoliticization of Arab–Jewish relations. Providing opportunities for social contact would lead to lasting coexistence in an ideal world where divisions are only horizontal and social conflict is the result of a "cultural gap"; assuming a natural flow from the former to the later does not take into account the initial hierarchy and power relations between the two communities. Stated plainly, when Jewish and Arab children leave their football practice, the Arab players return home to denser streets and a substantially lower quality of education, health, welfare, and public services. These gaps, which are on the rise (Haider *et al.*, 2010), are not only the consequences of the capitalist market but also embody the cumulative

effect of an active semi-colonial political reality in which the unequal distribution of resources is compatible with the state's ethnocentric ideology. The exclusion of any discussion of this reality is a precondition for a smooth Arab–Jewish encounter on the sport field.

John Sugden, the leading academic figure in the project, believes that “if imbued with socially progressive values and organized and managed correctly, [sport] can play a role in promoting peace and reconciliation in even the most fractured and deeply divided societies” (Sugden, 2010: 263). This statement might be valid as long as there is recognition by both sides that something is wrong with the existing political system and that sportive reconciliation does not come instead of political change. Otherwise, by depoliticizing the Arab–Jewish encounter, sport joins other uncommon isolated enclaves in Israel, such as pharmacies or the operating room, in which the Jewish political advantage is suspended and

replaced only temporarily by an egalitarian interaction based on commercial, professional, or sportive criteria. Regardless of the specific input of Football for Peace, as a general tendency sport in Israel/Palestine has not contributed so far to reconciliation, even though it clearly has the potential to do so. Unfortunately, the relatively liberal discourse which has been produced in the sport sphere has played a role in justifying and legitimizing the existing ethnic hierarchy in other spheres by providing an illusionary egalitarian model that cannot realistically be exported to other contexts.

Sport might not have the power to transform Israeli politics, but its proven sociopolitical power could significantly support such a transformation if and when it happens simultaneously in other spheres. We should not rule out, therefore, that under different future circumstances sport would support large-scale structural societal change in the country.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion of nationalism and masculinity in the history of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, see Katz (1996) and Boyarin (2000).
- 2 The 1936–1939 Arab revolt in Palestine was an uprising against the British Mandatory authorities in Palestine in protest against accelerated Jewish immigration and Zionist land purchase in the mid-1930s.
- 3 In 1949 Israel's first prime minister, David Ben Gurion, hesitated whether the department should be annexed to the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of Education and Culture, and decided in the end for the latter.
- 4 The Cairo agreement between the PLO and the Lebanese army established principles under which the activities of Palestinian guerrillas based in Lebanon would be tolerated and regulated by the Lebanese authorities. Subsequently, the PLO effectively created “a state within a state” in Lebanon.
- 5 See the Israeli Basketball Association website, <http://www.ibba.one.co.il/>, accessed December 17, 2012.
- 6 See <http://www.ibba.one.co.il/>, accessed December 17, 2012.
- 7 Calculation based on information available on the Israel Football Association website, <http://football.org.il/Leagues/Pages/LeagueDetails.aspx>, accessed December 17, 2012.
- 8 Calculation based on the Israeli Institute for Martial Arts website, <http://www.israel-martialarts.org>, accessed January 15, 2013.
- 9 Calculation is based on information available on the Israeli Boxing Association website: <http://www.boxingisrael.com/index.php>, accessed December 17, 2012.
- 10 Calculation is based on information available on the Israeli Boxing Association website, http://www.boxingisrael.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=33&Itemid=56, accessed January 15, 2013.
- 11 A major Palestinian party established in 1959 which advocated independent Palestinian action, autonomous from the interests of Arab states. The Fatah adopted armed struggle as a strategy and started implementing it from 1965.
- 12 The Jewish coach of Nazareth, Shimon Hadari decided to leave the team after this game. Some players were arrested by the police but were released later.
- 13 With the implantation of the Oslo accords in the mid-1990s in some territories the Palestinian Authority gained partial control over incongruent territories which accumulate to approximately 30 percent of the West Bank. The tangible control of the land, however, remains practically in Israeli hands.

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