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More Than a Game: Israel and Delegitimization in the Sporting Domain

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Notwithstanding Israel's full membership in an array of international sporting associations and a lack of discrimination against Israel on this level, the sports arena is often used, particularly by non-state actors, in attempts to discredit Israel internationally. However, overall, Israel seems to have successfully resisted BDS efforts in the sporting domain by working together with state officials and international sports associations. Indeed, official sporting associations and political authorities have proven to uphold the spirit of sportsmanship and enable Israeli athletes to compete under their national flag, similar to their fellow competitors. Thus, Israel – aided by non-state actors – should cultivate good working relations with individuals in relevant organizations in the sports world and increase proactive efforts to resist related efforts that seek to delegitimize Israel. On the non-state level, negative BDS campaigns should be addressed by counter civil society efforts - both reactively, in response to delegitimizing action designed to attack the state, and proactively, in independent legitimacy-building action that addresses the long term goal of harnessing sporting events to build bridges.

Four events of recent months in the global sporting arena offer insight into Israel's international standing. In June, the Toronto Raptors won the NBA Finals, and in reaction to the stated intention of one of the team owners to bring the players to Israel, BDS Canada launched a campaign to prevent such a tour from taking place. Also in June, BDS initiated a campaign against the German athletic-wear manufacturer Puma, following the signing of a four-year sponsorship deal with the Israel Football Association. In July, Israel hosted the 2019 FIBA Under-20 European Basketball Championship, and a 700 km bicycle ride, initiated by the Torah Academy school in Johannesburg, connected Israeli and local Jewish and black South African boys who cycled with Israeli and South African flags.

While the first two developments harnessed the sports arena to discredit Israel internationally, the July events served to leverage sporting events to award Israel international acclaim. Combined, the four cases bear testimony to two interlocked phenomena: staunch and unrelenting efforts of non-state actors to taint Israel's

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international standing by utilizing soft power tactics, and active efforts – by state and non-state actors – to enhance Israel's image abroad. In the background is Israel's full membership in an array of international sporting associations, and – as befitting good sportsmanship – a lack of discrimination against Israel on this level.

Milestones from the sporting arena in recent years are instructive in understanding the leverage that state and non-state actors, including professional sporting associations, have vis-à-vis Israel in the international sports arena. In 2016, a judoka from the Arab world refused to shake hands with his Israeli opponent at the Rio Olympic Games; a similar scene recurred at a match in Abu Dhabi the following year. In sporting events on Arab soil during the same period, Israeli athletes were banned from competing under their national flag, and Muslim athletes refused to compete against Israeli athletes. In June 2018, following Israel's decision to relocate a friendly soccer match between Argentina and Israel from Haifa to Jerusalem, and against the background of a BDS campaign, the Argentinian team canceled the match.

Four months later, in October 2018, Israel's national Women's Water Polo team was prevented from playing a match against the Spanish team in Molins de Rei, one of multiple municipalities in Spain that have endorsed BDS principles. This occurred even though the Spanish judiciary has cracked down on this practice, with two high courts defining it as discrimination. After extensive high level deliberations, the match commenced in an alternative venue in Spain (albeit with much less coverage and fewer spectators), with Spain's Minister for Sports José Girao issuing an apology, noting that "Spain ...cannot submit to such groups," i.e., BDS. Such a statement reflects the power dynamics between state and non-state players.

Also in 2018, however, Israel successfully hosted the world-famous Giro d'Italia cycling race, which in spite of an extensive negative BDS campaign, enabled a global audience to witness Israel through pure sporting lenses, detached from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In addition, in 2018 Israeli athletes openly participated under the Israeli flag in two sporting events in Arab countries: the Artistic Gymnastics World Championships in Qatar and the Judo Grand Slam tournament in Abu Dhabi, capital of the UAE. This latter event followed the intervention of the president of the International Judo Federation, Marius Vizer who declared that the competitions would be canceled if Israeli flags were not allowed to be raised.

In January 2019, the Malaysian government was adamant in its refusal to allow Israeli athletes to openly participate under their national flag in the 2019 World Para Swimming Championships, to be held in Malaysia. Following the intervention of the International Paralympic Committee, Malaysia was faced with either enabling Israeli athletes to

compete in the Championships (a qualifier for the Tokyo 2020 Paralympics) under the Israeli flag, or having Malaysia's right to host the competition revoked. Malaysia chose the latter alternative, leading to the International Paralympic Committee's decision to relocate the event to London.

Two central conclusions emerge from these developments. First, it appears that official bodies and state laws that are committed to sports ideals still dominate the sporting arena. As such, in both the Western and Arab worlds – despite loud negative campaigns – decisions that affect Israeli athletes and project on Israel's international standing are essentially taken by one person or by a limited group of position-holders. Second, while BDS appears to play a role in the background, it can hardly account for tangible results in the sporting domain. This is not to say that the campaign will not persist or that it will fail to reap fruit in the future.

As such, Israel should cultivate good working relations with individuals in relevant decision making mechanisms in the sporting arena toward two specific ends. One is that as demonstrated from the UAE, Spanish, and Malaysian examples, official sporting associations and political authorities have proven to uphold the spirit of sportsmanship and enable Israeli athletes to compete under their national flag, similar to their fellow competitors.

Another objective is the benefit associated with hosting international sporting events – a decision ultimately shaped by bids held within international sporting associations. Israel's successful bid to host the 2013 UEFA European Under-21 Soccer Championship is commonly perceived as linked to the campaign of several years by Avi Luzon, then Israeli soccer association president, to improve Israel's standing among European association presidents. In this respect, Luzon's standing with then-European federation president Michel Platini is considered to have contributed to Israel's bid. Another stepping stone on the road to host more international sporting events is the need to increase the budget allocated to the Ministry of Culture and Sports from the current figure of 0.03 percent of the state budget – an extremely low figure in comparison to other OECD countries. Without the budget needed to host tournaments, even warm relations with sporting association presidents won't guarantee Israel a seat at the bidding table.

Thus, Israel – aided by non-state actors – must increase proactive efforts to amplify simple facts from the sporting world that bear testimony to the state's democratic, pluralistic society – a characteristic strategically and systematically negated by the BDS campaign. Indeed, BDS campaigns largely focus on the protracted standstill in the Israeli-Palestinian political process. However, the fact that more than one third of Israel's

national soccer team includes Israeli Arab players and that the proportion of Arab players in Israel's youth soccer team is even greater is an important case in point.

On the non-state level, negative BDS campaigns should be addressed by counter civil society efforts advocating for Israel. This should be done both reactively, in response to delegitimizing action designed to smear the state – as in the Toronto Raptors and Puma examples; and proactively, in independent legitimacy-building action that addresses the long term goal of harnessing sporting events to build bridges – such as the cycling ride initiated by Torah Academy.