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Not Just Sports: Mixed Sentiments in Egyptian Discourse about Israel

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Politics are no stranger to the Olympic Games. Jesse Owens' gold medals in the 1936 Berlin Olympics, the Afro-American protest in Mexico in 1968, and the murder of Israeli athletes in Munich in 1972 are but a few of the many cases that prove this point. The match on the judo mat between Israeli Ori Sasson and Egyptian Islam el-Shehaby in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro likewise went beyond sports, and aroused much public interest in both countries and in the greater international community, more because of the surrounding events than because of its sportsmanship value. The question that arose before the match of whether el-Shehaby would even appear for the contest, and especially his refusal to shake hands with Sasson afterwards, sparked a widespread debate on Israel-Egypt relations and the question of normalization between the two countries. The debate reflected the tension between the understanding that sports is not divorced from politics and in many respects mirrors it, and the romantic longing for a sterile athletic playing field free of political influences. The refusal by the Lebanese athletes to allow the Israeli delegation to join them on their bus to the opening ceremony, and the failure of a Saudi judoka to appear for a bout that, had she won, would have matched her with an Israeli competitor intensified the debate, which extended beyond a discussion among sports fans to the public and political arenas.

A look at Egyptian public discourse, as reflected in the leading media and social networks, indicates the issue's complexity on a number of levels. One approach emphasized that el-Shehaby's decision not to shake hands with Sasson was understandable, and was actually the lesser of two evils. Matched in a bout against an Israeli put him in an impossible situation from which in any case he could not have emerged unscathed, and he chose to pay the price of being bashed and shamed in the press, in the virtual world, and internationally, rather than paying the heavy personal and professional price he felt he would have paid at home in the real world for shaking hands with an Israeli. This sentiment is not without precedent: only last February, Egyptian Football Association (EFA) spokesman Azmy Megahed did not rule out holding a match between the Egyptian and Israeli national teams, and received much venomous criticism in Egypt in response.

A more common sentiment in the Egyptian press and social media is the severe criticism of el-Shehaby's behavior. This criticism was channeled on two levels. The first involves the sportsmanship significance of the act, or more precisely, the non-act. In contrast to the praise won in August 2013 by Egyptian football player Muhammad Salah, who offered his fist to Maccabi Tel Aviv players in order to avoid shaking their hand in his Swiss team's game in the Champions League preliminaries, the Egyptian judoka is not returning to his country as a "national hero." Many regard el-Shehaby as having disgraced the sport and the Olympic Games – the epitome of international sportsmanship. His refusal to shake hands, regardless of his opponent's identity, was interpreted as frustration over his loss and an attempt to divert attention from his professional failure to political controversy, reminiscent of the frequent use by Egypt (and other Arab regimes) of the Palestinian issue to divert attention from their domestic failings. The most common term used to describe the situation was "pathetic," accompanied by the sense that the Egyptian flag had been disgraced.

Press articles also expressed dismay at the scene that portrayed Egypt in an unsportsmanlike attitude in front of millions around the world. For example, publicist Ali Awis wrote on the Civic Egypt portal that el-Shehaby should have obeyed the Olympic norms and convention from the time he stood "in the eye of the cameras, bore Egypt's flag on his chest, and represented a country with a great historical heritage," and that his refusal to bow to his opponent and shake his hand "will remain a stigma that will haunt him and the Egyptian team that went to represent the pharaohs' homeland." In an article in *al-Ahram*, Usama al-Ghazaly Harb, a founder of the liberal Free Egyptians Party and a former editor of *al-Siyasa al-Dawliya*, called el-Shehaby's conduct "unforgivable." At the same time, he also put part of the blame "on the ugly atmosphere created by the opponents of normalization in Egypt, which confused Islam [el-Shehaby], and caused his regrettable behavior, whose damage become clear later."

It thus emerges that the domestic criticism drawn by el-Shehaby was not merely due to his loss in the bout against his Israeli opponent, and also did not necessarily reflect the warming of Israeli-Egyptian relations in recent years; it was due first and foremost to the international embarrassment suffered by Egypt due to his conduct at a time when the country is struggling desperately to improve its image. The boos by the crowd in the hall in Rio de Janeiro, the negative headlines in the global media, and the summons to a hearing before the International Olympic Committee were all perceived as a much more severe and painful blow than the athletic humiliation. In an attempt to minimize the damage, the Egyptian Olympic Committee rushed to publish an announcement following the incident disavowing el-Shehaby's behavior, saying that it had been made clear to the judoka that he was obligated to follow the customary rules and display sportsmanship,

and that his choice not to shake the hand of his Israeli opponent was solely his own decision.

The concern for Egypt's positive image is regarded as extremely important at the present time, when Egypt needs the world's support in dealing with its economic distress. On August 6, 2016, *The Economist* published a special issue entitled "The Ruining of Egypt," which asserted that the el-Sisi regime has failed to address Egypt's economic and social problems and was facing another revolution. The personal criticism of the Egyptian president aroused enraged responses in Cairo, but also prompted some soul searching. On August 11, the day before the match between el-Shehaby and Sasson, Egypt reached agreement in principle with the International Monetary Fund for a \$12 billion three-year loan, in whose framework Egypt committed itself to a series of far reaching reforms aimed at restoring the world's confidence in the Egyptian economy. Egypt's image as a peace loving, stable, and advanced country combating extremism, rather than a stronghold of radical Islam, political chaos, and backwardness, is regarded by Egypt's leaders as a key to attracting foreign investment, rehabilitating the tourist industry, and increasing exports, growth, and development. Egypt's peaceful relations with Israel constitute an integral part of Egypt's positive international reputation. In this sense, sports in general, and the Olympics in particular, should have been part of Egypt's showcase of its favorable qualities, and leverage for rebranding itself as a regional power with an open and tolerant cultural heritage.

From the perspective of bilateral relations, underlying the debate is a material question concerning the nature and quality of the relations between Israel and Egypt, and in a broader sense, between Israel and the Arab world. Cooperation between Israel and Egypt has accelerated recently, most importantly in the security aspect, but also in other areas of common interest. The most recent expression of this was manifested by the July 2016 visit by Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sameh Shoukry to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem. The visit showed the mutual fruitful relations between the countries, but at the same time highlighted the gap between the leaders' interests in cooperation and the absence of the Egyptian public's willingness to accept this. There was a good reason why the Foreign Minister's visit was referenced in the Egyptian discourse following the Olympic judo match, in view of Shoukry and Netanyahu's joint viewing of a football game as an example of the contrast between the "warm" peace between leadership and the "cold" peace between the peoples – highlighted by the incident on the Olympic mat.

It appears that normalization, mentioned frequently in the context of the Olympic Games incident, remains a complex and sensitive idea for the Egyptian public. The complexity of the normalization issue would likely not be alleviated immediately even if a dramatic

positive change takes place in relations between Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, most of el-Shehaby's critics did not criticize him for ignoring his Israeli competitor and were not motivated by a desire for normalization, but by reasons involving sportsmanship and Egypt's image and international standing. At the same time, the very existence of an open public debate, in which opinions on all sides are heard on an issue considered taboo for many years, constitutes a notable development. The regime in Cairo and Egyptian politicians and intellectuals have long played an important role in shaping a more positive dialogue motivated by interests involving the current Egyptian agenda, although the general public (as reflected on the social media) is still not yet ready to take part in this dialogue. Particularly given that this is a gradual process, Israel should continue to focus on what is common to the leadership of both countries, not what divides the peoples, while maintaining the separation of political, security, and economic issues from more sensitive questions involving cultural and social matters covered by the "threatening" term of "normalization."

