Sport, politics and the struggle over ‘normalization’ in post-Oslo Israel and Palestine.

**Abstract**

This article uses sport as a theoretical tool to analyse Palestinian-Israeli relations in the post-Oslo era. It does so by looking at two major sport events, the start of the Giro d’Italia cycling race and the Israel-Argentina football match. These two events were scheduled to take place in Israel and the Occupied Territories within a month of each other, in May and June of 2018 respectively. Despite frequent claims of its ‘neutral’ and ‘apolitical’ nature, sport is closely intertwined with issues of identity, representation, community and nation. This is particularly true in contexts characterised by conflict and divisions. Sport and major sport events are particularly relevant considering post-Oslo developments in Israel and the Occupied territories. With any hope of a solution within the Oslo framework now seemingly faded, and the situation on the ground clearly favouring Israel and its allies, the actors are now vying over what this article define as ‘normalization of the status quo’. This study will show of sport events analysed are central to the strategies carried out by the main actors in the conflict, and therefore how sport can provide a unique tool to analyse recent developments in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

**Keywords:** Palestine, Israel, Sport and Politics, Levant, Post-Oslo.

Introduction

In the late Spring of 2018 two sport events organised in Israel and the Occupied territories made world news. The Start of the Giro d’Italia cycling race and the Israel-Argentina football match were scheduled to take place within a month of each other, in May and June of 2018 respectively. This article looks at the ‘politics’ behind the two events, and it analyses how both are part of what is defined here as the struggle over the normalization of the status quo in Israel/Palestine. Sport is closely intertwined with issues of identity, representation, community and nation. This is particularly true in the MENA region, where sport mirrors the complex and often contested nature of regional politics. From ‘international’ issues that led to Israel’s affiliation to UEFA rather than the AFC to ‘domestic’ divisions between Palestinians and Jordanians in Jordan, represented by the rivalry between the Wihdat and Al-Faisali football clubs, sport provides a unique tool to study and understand the region. This research will use sport as a lens to analyse the current trajectory of Israeli-Palestinian relations. Sport and major sport events are particularly relevant in the post-Oslo era. While violence remains a frequent occurrence in both the West Bank and Gaza, at international level the key battle is today over the normalization of the status quo (particularly Israel’s occupation of the West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem). With any hope of a solution within the Oslo framework now seemingly faded, and the power balance on the ground clearly favouring Israel and its allies, the actors are now vying over the legitimacy of their respective positions.

 Sport has traditionally played an important role in Israeli-Palestinian relations. Today, sport is not only political, but can also be seen as central to the strategies pursued by key actors in the conflict. On one side, Israeli attempt to ‘normalise’ the situation on the ground. The Israeli government and its allies are seeking to project an image of post-conflict normality. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the occupation are shown as something from the past, something that Israel has somehow overcame. Sport and particularly major sporting events are part of this narrative and can be seen as ‘showcases’ for an Orientalist representation of Palestinian-Israeli relations that is part of Zionist ideology. On the other side, a varied coalition of Palestinians and international allies are seeking to contest the status quo on the ground and its ‘normalization’. Major sport events can provide a catalyst for domestic and transnational opposition. Sport and particularly high-profile events provide ideal opportunities to carry out coordinate campaigns. Furthermore, membership of FIFA, the World Football association, has provided the Palestinians with an international forum to attempt to hold Israel accountable for its human rights violations and consequently for the occupation itself. By looking at the latter case, the article will also highlight the role of the global sport governance structures and how they shape the relationship between sport and politics.

This article is divided in six sections. Section one discusses the relevant literature, methodology, aims and limitations of the paper. Section two engages with the Post-Oslo situation in Israel-Palestine in order to provide the broad context for the analysis, as well as showing why sport represents a useful analytical tool. Section three analyses the first case study, the 2018 Giro d’Italia. Section four focuses on Palestinian football and specifically on the campaign against the 2018 Argentina-Israel friendly match. Section five analyses the two events and their broader political relevance in regard to recent developments in Israel and Palestine. Section six contains some final remarks.

Sport and politics: an overview

The theoretical framework of this article is located at the intersection between international relations and sociology of sport. It also uses insights from the literature on soft power and diplomacy to frame the role of major sport events. Levemore and Budd (2004) show how international relations and political science have often ignored sport. The existing social sciences literature has focused on aspects such as sport and gender (Hargreaves and Anderson, 2016) race (Booth, 2017) ‘sport and peace’ (Young and Ocada, 2014) or the use of sport by specific social movements (Cayli, 2013). Bairner’s work looks at the relation between sport and identity, in particular in the case of Northern Ireland (2013, 2015). The role of sport as an area of public diplomacy has attracted growing attention and has contributed to the literature on soft power and public diplomacy (Cull, 2008: Price and Dayan, 2008). MacLean (2014) analyses the role of sport boycotts as political tools. The impact of major sport events has been studied by Grix and Lee (2013), whose research shows how developing countries use mega-events such as Olympics and Football World Cups to enhance their soft power, focusing on the cases of South Africa, China and Brazil. This study also highlights how major sport events have become in the last decades a sough-after prize that states compete over, in stark contrast with the previous phase when international sport organisation such as FIFA and CIO had to actively ‘recruit’ potential host nations. Brannagan and Giulianotti (2014) discuss how in the case of Qatar the hosting of the 2022 world cup represents an attempt to project a particular image of the country on the international scene. Roche (2000) has looked at how big events (such as Olympics as well as Expos) have historically affected national identity and public political space. More recent work by the same author (2006) has looked at the role of major sport events and their relations with the process of globalisation, using the case of Olympic games. While this literature provides interesting insights in how sport is used to convey political messages, few of these authors have dealt specifically with the use of sport to channel opposing (and contrasting) messages in the context of conflict and political rivalry. A small body of literature dealing with boycotts of Olympic events and their political implications represent a notable exception (Berg et al., 2017; Guttman, 1988) On the contrary, a substantial body of literature discussed the role of sport as a conflict resolution tool. This includes studies such as Nygard and Gates (2013) analyse the potential of sport as a soft-power, dialogue and trust-building instrument. The usefulness of this branch of literature is limited by their focus on the positive (beneficial to all the actors involved) effects of the political use of sport.

The relationship between sport and politics in the Middle East has attracted the attention of several scholars. The volume *Soccer in the Middle East* (Khalidi and Raab, 2015) contains several contributions dealing with the relation between football and politics. Duerr (2012) discusses the relation between national identity and football in the case of Palestine, and frames Palestinian’s membership of FIFA as part of this process. Different contributions focusing on regional case studies are included in the *Sport, Politics and Society in the Middle East* volume (Reiche and Sorek, 2019). Included in this book are a chapter on Jordanian-Palestinian football rivalry in Jordan (Tuastad, 2019) and one on football and domestic Israeli politics (Sorek, 2019). Reiche’s work focused on the cases of Turkey and Lebanon, including an article dealing with the latter’s sport boycott of Israel (2016). Despite the work of Sorek on football and politics in Palestine (2005) and among Israel’s Arab population (2007) the case of sport in Palestinian-Israeli relations has been understudied. Dart (2016) looks at how sport plays a growing role in Israel’s Hasbara (external diplomacy- PR). Recent research (Sudgen, 2016) looked at the role of sport in conflict resolution and coexistence in Israel.

This article seeks to use sport to engage with the recent trajectory of Israeli-Palestinian relations. The literature on this topic is vast and multi-disciplinary, arguably making it the most widely researched topic in Middle Eastern Studies. The need to ‘widen the parameters of the debate’ has been stressed by several contributions appearing in this journal in the last few years (Tartir and Olivera Martins, 2016). The article seeks to contribute to this literature by bringing a novel approach to the study of the topic, one based on the role of sport and major sport events. In doing so, this article will contribute to a growing body of literature that engages with the post-Oslo reality of the conflict. Recent studies on this topic focus on new forms of Palestinian political struggle (Carpenter, 2018) and the growth and transformation of the human rights movement in Israel/Palestine (Hajjar, 2017). The status of Jerusalem has been the subject of several studies, such as Shlomo’s (2017) work on the political geography of the city in the post Oslo context.

Methodology

The methodology used by this research is qualitative. Qualitative analysis has been chosen because it allows to carry out an in-depth study of the connection between sport events and politics in the case of Palestinian-Israeli relations. The study is based on the analysis of a broad ranges of secondary sources (articles and books) as well as a set of key documents (such as statements given to the press by key actors) and, where relevant, other material (such as videos) produced for the events. The article focuses on two cases: the hosting of the Giro d’Italia by Israel and the (cancelled) Argentina-Israel friendly football match. These events are particularly relevant for two reasons: the high resonance that they had at both local and international level and the symbolic value that the actors involved attributed to them. For both case studies, the study will provide an analysis of the events in the context of the recent developments in Palestinian Israeli relations. The research will focus specifically on two actors and institutions: Sylvan Adams and his ‘Cycling Network’ and Jibril Rajoub and the Palestinian Football Association (from here one also referred to as Palestinian FA or PFA). These two men and the organizations they head are the driving forces behind the recent developments of these two sports in their countries. Furthermore (and crucially) they are both part of their countries’ elite and ‘political’ actors that consciously frame sport and sport events in the context of broader political strategies[[1]](#footnote-1).

Aims and limitations

This paper focuses on two sporting events and their role in Palestinian-Israeli relations. It has two aims:

1. To demonstrate that sport and major sporting events provide a unique lens into the politics of conflict-ridden contexts.

1. To use sport to shed light on the changing nature of Palestinian Israeli relations and the long-term strategies pursued by the main actors in the Post-Oslo era.

The main contribution of the article is therefore to the field of Middle Eastern Politics and particularly Palestine/Israel studies. The article in fact seeks to contribute to the development of new tools to understand the changing nature of Palestinian-Israeli relations. The next section will discuss why this is particularly relevant and topical in light of recent developments on the ground. The article also seeks to provide an outsider’s contribution to the field of sociology of sport by developing the correlation between sport events and political strategies and complementing this analysis with two case studies.

The topic of sport and politics in the context of Palestine and Israel is wide and multi-faceted. Inevitably, this paper had to focus on two cases and leave other (interesting and relevant) aspects for future research. As it focuses on two events, the paper does not offer a systemic analysis of the development of Israeli cycling or Palestinian football and its impact of inter-community and external relations. While this topic would undoubtedly contribute to the current debate, it is beyond the scope of this analysis. The paper does not deal with Israeli ‘Hasbara’ (public diplomacy) in the context of other sporting events, such as the U21 European Football Championship hosted by Israel in 2014. Furthermore, the paper does not analyse the interesting debate that took place at UEFA rather than FIFA level, as it focuses more on Palestinian agency. Finally, the paper does not engage with the role of sport within the respective communities, nor with the (ever-popular) issue of sport as a conflict-resolution tool.

The post-Oslo context

This section will provide a brief account of Palestinian-Israeli relations post-Oslo and discuss the meaning of normalization in this context. In doing so, the section will explain why ‘non-traditional’ issues such as sport and particularly sporting events provide a unique lens to analyse the recent trajectory of Palestinian-Israeli relations. Whilst this article deals with Post-Oslo relations, the task of identifying the timeframe of the Post-Oslo era is rather hard. The Second Intifada (September 2000) closed the long period of negotiations between the PLO and the state of Israel. However, the Oslo structure based on the establishment of the Palestinian Authority and the limited sovereignty this institution enjoyed, survived the flare up in violence (and is still largely in place up to date). End of the ‘Oslo consensus’ is arguably a more accurate description of developments, whereby ‘Oslo consensus’ indicates a set of key tenets on the conflict and its potential resolution. Chief among these was the illegality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, shared by every state bar Israel itself, and the understanding that key issues such as the status of Jerusalem or the right of return had to be negotiated between the two parties. The Trump’s administration’s decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in 2017 represents a watershed but can also been seen as the culmination of a gradual shift in US foreign policy (Shlaim, 2010.) With this decision Washington signalled it had completed its transition from attempting to favour a negotiated solution (albeit arguably one that would have favoured its long-term ally) to ‘freezing’ Israel’s gains on the ground (Cherkaoui, 2017). This shift was later confirmed by the so called ‘Trump Plan’. Rather than a peace proposal in a traditional sense of the term, the plan envisaged unilateral concessions by one side (the Palestinians) in exchange for the promise of significant investments in the Palestinian economy (Young, 2020). Most recently, the newly appointed Israeli coalition government announced plans to annex part of the Occupied West Bank from July 2020. At the same time a varied coalition of forces that seek to contest the legitimacy and viability of the Israeli occupation has emerged. Chief among this is the Boycott Disinvest and Sanction (BDS) movement. This Palestinian-led grassroot campaign seeks to pressure Israel to stop the occupation chiefly by boycotting Israel’s economy and international brands that support in different ways the occupation (Morrison, 2005).

Within this context, the current struggle is defined as being over the ‘normalisation of the status quo’. In Palestine, normalisation (tatbeea) usually refers of those activities that aim to build relations with Israel in different realms. Normalisation in this study has more of an ‘recognition’ meaning, as it refers to the attempts carried out by the two parties to legitimise or contest the situation on the ground (chiefly the occupation of Eastern Jerusalem and the West Bank) With Israel firmly in control on the ground and galvanised by the unlimited support of its superpower ally, the main threat to its domination comes from the state’s negative reputation and the international community’s rejection of the occupation and related international law violations. This new phase is characterised by ‘no open conflict nor negotiations’, as well as by a gradual detachment of traditional actors (particularly Arab states) from the conflict. Under these circumstances, sport and major sport events provide a better insight into relations between actors than traditional conflict analysis or conflict resolution tools. Major sport events can in fact represent useful soft power tools (Darts, 2016), but also act as catalysts for dissent and contestation.

The giro d’Italia 2018. Hasbara and ‘normal’ Israel

On the 4th of May 2018 the Giro d’Italia, one of the world’s most famous cycling races, started for the first time in its history (as well as in the history of any major European cycling race) outside of the Old Continent. The Grande Partenza or Big Start took place in Israel and Occupied Eastern Jerusalem. After a short time trial in Jerusalem, two stages took place around the country the following days, before the Giro went ‘back home’ to Sicily[[2]](#footnote-2). This choice was surprising to many, given the fact that Israel had no significant cycling tradition. RCS media, the group that organise the event, cashed a hefty sum of money from the government to hold the first three days of the event in Israel[[3]](#footnote-3), approximatively 17 million £ according to reports (Abraham,2017). Why did Israel, a country with little cycling tradition, decided to invest a significant amount of money on hosting the Giro d’Italia? A first obvious reason is tourism promotion. Hosting the event was widely regarded as a major PR coup for Israel. The Giro d'Italia attracts every year millions of viewers all around the world. This is confirmed by the fact that the Israeli minister of Tourism was strongly involved in the organisation of the event, and reputedly invested 6.25 million shekels (approximatively 1.6 million £) in different activities connected to the race (Davidovich-Weisberg, 2018). Amir Halevi, the director general of the minister of Tourism, a few days before the start of the race declared that: *‘An international event on this scale is expected to attract to Israel thousands of tourists and contributes millions of shekels to the economy immediately’*(Ibid.)*.* However, the promotion of tourism is only part of the story. More than simply promoting tourism, the event was a public diplomacy effort that sought to project a particular image of the state of Israel and of the situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

The direct involvement of different ministries in the organisation of the event clearly shows the support granted to the initiative by the Israeli government. The main force behind the event was however not the Israeli government, but Canadian-Israeli billionaire Sylvan Adams. Adams was the president of the ‘Giro d’Italia Big Start in Israel’ committee, and the main mind behind the start of the event in Israel. Adams is also the man behind the rise of professional cycling in Israel. Having built his economic empire largely in Canada, Adams moved to Israel in 2015, establishing himself in Tel Aviv and leaving his son Jon in charge of Iberville Developments, the Montreal-based family company (Cashman, 2019). The list of his contributions to Israel’s sport life includes the creation of a brand-new sport centre located by historical West Jerusalem YMCA, completed with the vital contribution of the Sylvan Adams foundation (Keyser,2018). A cycling fanatic and successful amateur cyclist himself, Adams had devoted himself to developing cycling in Israel as well as raising the profile of Israeli cycling in the world. The rise of Israel Cycling Academy, the country’s first ever international cycling team, put Israel on the world cycling map. However, it is the hosting of three days of the Giro d’Italia that represents, in Adams’ own opinion, his most important sporting achievement so far. On several occasions, Adams had been particularly clear in explaining what he considered to be the goals of hosting the Giro d’Italia in Israel. However, the fragment that better simplifies his views is an interview given for a promotional video recorded in May 2017 (and aptly named Sylvan Adams vision). This short PR video (approximatively 3 minutes) shows images of Israel and particularly Jerusalem, whilst Adams explain the significance of staging the event in Israel (Giro d’Italia Big Start Israel, 2018):

*‘Bringing the Giro d’Italia to Israel will provide the opportunity for hundreds of millions of sport fans to see our country. We are bypassing the traditional media, we are reaching the sport fans. They are apolitical by nature. They don’t care about our problems and conflicts...the TV announces will be talking about our history and our culture. When they show off Jerusalem, and they show our Knesset and how Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East.. and they show our 3000 years attachment to Jerusalem. Our pluralistic culture, our mixed society, that has both Jew and Arabs and other citizens, how we all get along. This is what is going to be on display, what I call normal Israel. The Israel that I experience as an Israeli one a daily basis. Telling our story to the world, this is the new chapter of Zionism, where Israel is no longer a poor country..and by showing us as normal sporting nation, this is another way we tell our story, as a member of the modern Western world of great nations’.*

Adams reproduces here the main elements of Israel Hasbara, and particular of what has been defined as ‘Brand Israel’. This new strategy, elaborated by the Israeli Foreign Ministry in 2005 with the specific goal of countering the growing boycott of Israeli products and companies, aims to channel simple ‘visual’ messages and slogans to associate with the image of Israel (Dart, 2016). These are considered to be more effective than complex explanations that engage with the history and politics of the region. (Dart,2016, p.1407) Simple slogans such as ‘Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East’, coupled with images of the country and its parliament, are clearly part of this strategy. This message also incorporates Orientialist representations of Israel as modern and Western, as opposed to the Palestinians, seen as naive and simple at best, and often as primitive and violent. These representations are well documented by the existing literature, starting from the work of Edward Said (1979). As Gerber (2003) points out, these Orientalist interpretations have been highlighted in particular with reference to the events of 1948. The in-depth reassessment of Israel’s founding narrative carried out by the New Historians provided a starting point for this reflection. In fact, even the work of some of the New Historians, particularly those writing from a Zionist point of view such as Benni Morris, is replete with Orientalist representations of the Palestinians and their life pre-1948 (Gerber, 2003, p.24). Orientalist representations of Palestinian-Israeli relations are however by no means limited to historical events, but have rather transcended Zionism’s founding narrative and now characterise Israel’s relation with the outer world (as well as its ‘self-identity’). The specific association made by Adams here is between cycling and modernity. In Adams’ narrative, cycling is a modern sport, practised by ‘the great nations of the Western world’. This is in contrast to non-Western, non-modern people, a clear reference to the other people of the land, the Arabs. What makes this statement (as well as similar ones given by Adams) remarkable, is the explicit connection between the sport event and the political sphere. This is manifested in two ways: firstly a connection to a new chapter of Zionism, one where Israel is ‘no longer a poor country’. Progress and economic well-being is another common theme of Hasbara, a modern version of the classic ‘Making the Desert Bloom’ Zionist myth (George, 1979). Even more significant is the reference to ‘Normal Israel’, achieved by showing the country as part of the ‘normal sporting nations’. Normal in this context clearly refers to Israel ‘beyond’ the conflict. Adams sees the Giro d’Italia has an occasion to present Israel as a ‘normal state’, not one that has been embroiled in a long (and unsolved) dispute and particularly not one that is illegally occupying the West Bank and Eastern Jerusalem, built illegal settlements or blockading Gaza. This strategy, part of what this study as defined here normalization of the status quo, is completely ‘political’, contrary to what declared by Adams himself.

The political relevance of the event is confirmed once more by a diplomatic incident that took place a few months before the race. In November 2017 RCS Media published the official programme of the race, including the maps of each stage. The maps representing the time-trial taking place on the first day referred to Western and Eastern Jerusalem. This allegedly happened after RCS media had consulted the Italian Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The officials advised that according to international law Eastern Jerusalem is illegally occupied by Israel and claimed by the Palestinians as part of their future state (Beaumont, 2017). Israel on the other hand claims ownership over the entirety of the city, and in 1981 has declared it ‘United and Indivisible Capital of the State of Israel’. The publication of the map was met with a harsh reaction by several Israeli ministers, that openly threatened to withdraw the funding and cancel the event unless the name of the city was amended(Beaumont, 2017). Risking to lose significant income and to have to re-arrange the route of the race a few months before the start, the organisers caved in to Israeli pressure and threats and dropped the wording ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’ Jerusalem, leaving only Jerusalem as required by Israel.

Political Footballs and the Argentina-Israel match

The previous section discussed the role of the Giro d’Italia in Israel’s normalization of the status quo strategy. This section looks at the second case study, Palestinian football and the cancellation of the Argentina-Israel football match. This case shows how sport has been used to contest the normalization of the status quo by Israel and its allies. Firstly, the admission of the Palestinian Football Federation to FIFA has provided the Palestinians a platform to contest Israeli violations of human rights (and therefore the Occupation). Membership of an organisation such as FIFA requires the respect of a set of rules, as well as providing a forum to hold members who are violating these rules accountable. Furthermore by focusing on the Argentina-Israeli friendly football match how major sport events have the ability to act as ‘catalyst’ for domestic and external opposition.

Unlike cycling, football has a long history in Palestine and Israel. As Blincoe (2019) shows, different communities attempted to exploit the sport as an identity marker well before the establishment of the state of Israel. Football in particular was used by the New Yishuv elites as a community-making tool. Inspired by European nationalist, they created sport societies based on the models of those that existed in the Old Continent. These clubs often included a football team. While grassroot football was popular among every community in the land, it was the exclusively Jewish (and ironically named) Palestine Football Association that was able to gain affiliation to FIFA in 1928. The membership was obtained through a document that represented this organisation as ‘intercommunal’ and representative of football in the whole region, while in reality it ran a small league limited to the Jewish community (Blincoe, 99). This early recognition provided what later became the Israeli Football Association (Israeli FA or IFA) with an initial advantage in terms of international status and legitimacy. The Palestinian Football Association on the other hand was recognised by FIFA only in 1998. The membership provided the Palestinians with the opportunity to develop their football system. It however also provided a political platform for Palestinian authorities. Israel in fact was (and still is) arguably violating several of FIFA’s own rules in regards to its relations with Palestinians and Palestinian Football. Israel is accused of regularly preventing Palestinian footballers from travelling to train and/or play, as well as having incarcerated without charge Palestinian footballers such as Mohamed Sarsak (BBC News, 2012). The issue of Israeli teams based in settlements (therefore in the Occupied West Bank) has been particularly controversial (Beaumont,2016). Currently seven teams affiliated to the ILA are based in the occupied West Bank, something openly prohibited by FIFA’s own rules[[4]](#footnote-4).

Throughout the 2000s, Palestinian authorities raised on several occasions the issues related to these violations. Unable to obtain any result with this approach, the PFA decided to escalate its actions. In 2013 President Rajoub asked that FIFA discuss the situation of football in Palestine (Ber et al, 2017). Following an inconclusive FIFA report, in 2015 the PFA formally requested the suspension of the Israeli Football Association from FIFA, the World Football Association. If successful, this act would have essentially ‘suspended’ Israel from partaking in any officially sanctioned football event. The request of suspension cited three main points(Ibid, p.14):

*‘(1) Israel was restricting the movement of players and equipment into and out of the Palestinian territories;*

*(2) IFA was discriminating on racial bases;*

*(3) five Israeli clubs were playing on an occupied Palestinian territory.’*

Despite the support of a large majority of Football Associations, the motion was overhauled by then FIFA President Blatter[[5]](#footnote-5) and PFA President Rajoub was eventually convinced to withdraw the request (Guardian, 2015). New FIFA President Gianni Infantino has since prevented the PFA from bringing about a new vote on the issue, declaring on several occasions that FIFA had to ‘remain neutral’ on what is a ‘political matter’ (Reuters, 2017). While the institutional approach might have failed, at least till now, to obtain the suspension of Israel from world football, it has however provided a platform for Palestinians to raise awareness of the issue.

In parallel to (and in support of) this institutional approach, a grassroot movement aimed at raising awareness and increasing pressure on Israeli football has grown in the last few years, and scored a significant success in 2018. The Red Card Israel Campaign, ran by the BDS movement, has been able to increase awareness about the limitations imposed by Israel on Palestinian Football. The campaign has attempted to pressure both FIFA and UEFA to sanction the IFA[[6]](#footnote-6). The movement had (unsuccessfully) ran a campaign boycotting Israel’s hosting of the 2014 Under 21 European Championship (MacLean, 2014). Brands associated with Israeli football have also been pressured to break their partnerships. German sport brand Puma (IFA’s Sponsor) has recently been the target of a boycott campaign, with the BDS with yearly ‘Day of Action’ aiming at convincing the company to drop its sponsorship of the Israeli national football team (The New Arab, 2019). This followed a similar campaign that had targeted Adidas, the previous sponsor of the IFA. The biggest success obtained by the movement however is arguably the cancellation of the Israel-Argentina football match. The friendly match, scheduled for the 8th of June 2018, was supposed to be Argentina’s last preparation match before the start of the 2018 World Cup in Russia. The match was initially scheduled to be played in Haifa, but was later moved to Jerusalem by the IFA. This change, controversial because of the contested status of Eastern Jerusalem, provided the catalyst for a very effective campaign by the PFA, the BDS movement and other anti-occupation activists. About a week before the match, the Argentinian Football Federation decided to call the match off. Conscious of the negative consequences of the cancellation, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu called directly President Macri of Argentina in an attempt to get the match back on, without obtaining any result (BBC, 2018). Partially to justify his government’s inability to intervene, Argentinian Foreign Minister Jorge Faurie declared to the media that ‘Our players were unwilling to play’ (Ibid.).

The man that better represents the political relevance of football in the context of Israel and Palestine is undoubtedly General Jibril Rajoub, President of the Palestinian Football Association. Rajoub is both the main figure behind the rise of Palestinian football and a high-profile member of Fatah in the West Bank. His role in both the PFA and the Palestinian Authority shows the involvement and support of the Palestinian political leadership in ‘football politics’. The general had been the National Security Advisor (the head of the security forces) of the Palestinian Authority during the Arafat years (Blincoe, 2019, p.221). Removed from its position by Mahmoud Abbas, Rajoub had re-invented himself as the head of the PFA as well as of the Palestinian Olympic Committee. In his new position as head of Palestinian football, Rajoub is credited with both improvements in the quality of the football league (or leagues, since because of restrictions there are currently separated leagues in the West Bank and Gaza) and with the good results obtained by the national team (Blincoe, 2019). Rajoub’s role in the campaign against the IFA is however arguably more politically relevant, and will be the focus of this analysis. As a member of the PLO (and later a high-ranking PA official), Rajoub had directly been involved in the 1990s push to obtain membership of FIFA. As outlined before, Rajoub attempted to obtain Israel’s suspension to FIFA in 2015 and sought to brought the matter up with the institution again in recent years. The PFA was also one of the most vocal voices campaigning against the Israel-Argentina friendly football match. The Head of the PFA made the news when he asked Palestinian football fans to burn Messi’s shirts if he and Argentina played the match against Israel. Widely criticised for these threats, Rajoub was rather undeterred. After the news of the cancellation of the match broke out, the PFA released a statement thanking Argentina and his captain Messi. Rajoub was quick to score a political point: ‘What happened... is a red card from the rest of the world to Israelis’ (BBC News, 2018).

Rajoub’s involvement shows two key elements of the strategy carried out by the Palestinians and the international coalition supporting them in an attempt to contrast the normalization of the status quo. The first is the reliance on international organisations and international law. The attempt to bring the matter of Israel’s violations to FIFA can be seen as a way to bypass Israel’s military superiority and create a higher level of accountability, but also clearly to use international institutions as an ‘amplifier’ to counter Israeli Hasbara. This mirrors what Khaled Elgindy, himself a close advisors of President Abbas, defines as ‘the New Statehood Strategy’ (Elgindy,2011). Faced with the stalling of the Peace Process and accused of being largely irrelevant or even a partner in Israel’s enduring occupation, the Palestinian Authority attempted to pursue membership of the UN as well as of other international institutions in order to ‘gain some leverage’. This strategy resulted in the achievement of Non Member State Observer Status at the United Nations in November 2012, but also full membership of organisations such as UNESCO (UNnews, 2011). The second is the attempt to galvanise international support behind the movement contesting Israel’s normalization of the status quo. In this extent, sport events can provide a catalyst for grassroot campaigns. In the case of the Argentina match, the declaration by the Argentinian foreign minister as well as statements released by some of the players show how the footballers themselves played a key part in the decision to cancel the match (Reuters, 2018). Rajoub rushed (and in many ways unpleasant) invitation to burn Messi’s jersey was met with widespread condemnation. However, it does also exemplifies how major sport events can(partially because of the involvement of ‘high profile’ public figures such as sportsmen) be particularly vulnerable to targeted campaigns. In the case of the Argentina-Israel friendly, it was Israel’s own attempt to politicise the football match by moving it from ‘neutral’ Haifa to Jerusalem (shortly after the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv) that kickstarted the campaign.

Sport, politics and the struggle over normalization

The two case studies analysed offer a novel and insightful reading of the current trajectory in Israeli-Palestinian relations. This is at its core a fight over recognition and legitimacy, particularly at international level. Clearly, this aspect is not unique to Palestine and Israel. Every conflict contains in itself a ‘war of narratives’. However recent developments in Palestinian Israeli relations have made this the crucial aspect of the conflict. One of the longest-standing and most divisive issue not only in the region, but in the all world, the conflict has seen all-out war (often involving neighbouring Arab states) and a phase of negotiation during which a solution to the dispute seemed to be within reach. With the benefit of hindsight, it is highly debatable whether the Oslo process was a real push towards a solution to the conflict or rather a successful attempt by Israel and its allies to rein in the weaker Palestinians (Shlaim, 2010). Certainly, recent developments have signalled the (at least partial) abandonment of the Oslo framework by Israel and its allies. In this post-Oslo era, negotiations between the parties appear to be highly unlikely, and open conflict (while always a possibility) does not appear imminent due to Israel’s dominant position. This political stalemate is allowing Israel to take advantage of its superiority on the ground by entrenching its control over Easter Jerusalem and the West Bank. International recognition of the status quo is the missing piece of the puzzle for Israel. At the same time, the Palestinians and the international coalition supporting them have focused their efforts on contesting the normalization of the status quo. In this context, major sport events have proved to be not only part of these efforts, but also highly symbolic occurrences used by both parties to strengthen a specific narrative of the situation on the ground.

The two cases analysed in this article took place during the same period of time and both have highly symbolic value. The Giro d’Italia provides a clear example of Israel’s normalization of the status quo. Hosting a high-profile event with an international audience has clear ‘tourism promotion’ benefits. However the cycling race represent way more than an opportunity to raise the touristic profile of the country. The Giro provides an opportunity for Hasbara, and particularly to promote ‘Brand Israel’ (Dart, 2016). What make this case relevant and telling is the clear connection made between sport and politics. In the word of its main organiser, the Giro represents an opportunity for Israel to ‘tell its story’ (Giro d’Italia Big Start 2018, 2017). The story is that Israel is a modern, Western country- a ‘normal’ country. Not a place of conflict, and certainly not a country that is illegally occupying the West Bank and blockading Gaza. This story is a clearly Zionist one, and is one where the dispute and particularly the occupation have been erased. It is a story of ‘modernity’ clearly associate here with what is seen as a Western sport. The fact that cycling is completely new in the land, and has been ‘brought’ by Israel (hence by Zionism), is used here to confirm that modernity (and progress) are associated with these inhabitants on the land. A sport event is used here by Israel (the side that ‘won’ the Oslo Peace accords) to promote a narrative that erases the other inhabitants of the land, and the conflict itself, what has frequently been described as ‘sport-washing’.

The case of the Argentine-Israel football match however shows how the politicisation of sport is a two-edged sword. While high-profile sport events can be used to put forward a particular political message or narrative, they can also be subject to political campaigns that are successful precisely because of this politicisation. The decision by Israelis authorities to move the match from Haifa to Jerusalem in this case contributed to ‘politicise’ the issue, given the contested status of the city. This choice allowed a coalition of forces fighting against the normalization of the status quo (that includes Israel’s annexation of Eastern Jerusalem) to carry out a well-coordinated campaign against the event. The campaign also benefited from the ‘public’ profile of footballers, that made them susceptible to public pressure . The case of the Argentine-Israel match is part of a broader campaign that seeks to use football and particularly sport institutions in a public diplomacy struggle (Ber et al, 2017). As both the Palestinian Football Association and the Israeli Football Association are members of FIFA, the President of the PFA Jibril Rajoub has sought to contest the limitations and violations of human rights imposed on Palestinian football and footballers (Blincoe, 2019). Institutional intervention has so far prevented the suspension of the IFA from FIFA, however the issue has allowed the Palestinians to shed light on the violations carried out by Israel and engage with audiences that are not usually involved or interested in these issues. Furthermore, the role of FIFA in this case underlines the importance of global sport institutions. The refusal to intervene and regulate a case that clearly violates its own rules, while justified with the need to be ‘neutral’, represent in itself a political act. The case of Israeli football also draws interesting comparisons with the boycott of Apartheid South Africa. It this case international sport institutions were a key ground were the ‘sport war’ was fought. The South African Sport Association became an hub for the opposition to racial discrimination policies, and was able to effectively lobby the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as early as the 1960s. Worried about a possible split between developed and developing countries, the IOC condemned the racial policies carried out by the South African government and later followed up the threat by excluding the country from the 1964 Tokyo Olympics (Keech and Houlihan,1999). This was the start of a long process that would have culminated in the international boycott of South African cricket and rugby. The exclusion of South Africa from world sport was one of the most symbolic and ‘visual’ representations of the country’s isolation in the international community (Ibid). A full expulsion of the IFA from FIFA would likely have a similar effect, but it appears to be extremely unlikely at the moment given the strong opposition of FIFA management and particularly President Gianni Infantino (Al Jazeera, 2017). However, football can be used by activists to broadcast the reality of the occupation by highlighting the limitation imposed on carrying out an everyday activity such as playing football. This represents a substantial counter to the idea of normal relations, and ultimately of the normalization of the status quo. Furthermore, both companies involved at different levels in Israeli football and specific high profile events can be subjected to targeted campaigns. Whilst the impact of these is not comparable to an exclusion of Israel from world football, it should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

‘Everything is politics’ is a quote often attributed to German writer Thomas Mann. The quote captures well how virtually every issue can be political and politicised. As this article showed, this is particularly true in the case of sport and sporting events. Sport is by its nature connected to issues of identity, community and nation. As such, sport can play an important role in the strategies carried out by actors in contexts characterised by conflict and divisions, and in particular it can be central to the narratives of different conflicting parties. Peace studies scholar have often drawn attention to sport ‘therapeutic’ ability to build bridges across communities. However a more accurate reading of the issue suggests that sport is often far from a reconciliation tool, but rather a tool that can be used for different purposes, including waging a ‘war of narratives’.

This inherently political nature of sport make it an excellent lens to understand political developments in context were more traditional tools and lenses do not apply, or apply only partially. This is certainly the case of the subject of this case study, Palestinian-Israeli relations in the Post-Oslo era. This study article analysed two cases. The first is the Start of the Giro d’Italia. The second is the Argentina-Israel friendly football match and the campaign against Israeli football. Both cases are highly significant beyond the realm of sport. The organisation of the Giro d’Italia can be seen as part of Israel’s attempt to normalise the status quo on the ground. In this case aspects of Israeli Hasbara are presented with strongly Orientalist undertones. Cycling is in fact represented as a modern and ‘Western’ sport, and associated with Israel and the Jewish population of the land. The case of the Argentina-Israel football match and more broadly the campaign against Israeli football represents well two key aspects of the strategy pursued by the (Palestinian-led) broad coalition fighting against this normalization. The successful campaign against the football friendly show how the politicisation of sport can be countered by other actors and ‘targeted’ by broad coalitions. The campaign carried out by Palestinian authorities and campaigners against the IFA and Israeli footballis part of a broader ‘institutional’ approach. FIFA provides an institutional avenue for the Palestinian to raise their concerns, but also a forum where these concerns can be amplified and reach a broader audience. Given recent developments in Israel/Palestine, sport is bound to become more and more of a contested ground, and therefore increasingly more of a useful tool to understand the changing nature of Palestinian/Israeli relations.

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1. While the focus is here on these two actors, it is important to recognise how (particularly on the side of the pro-Palestinian coalition campaigning on the issue of football) different actors such as the media and elites in both Israel-Palestine and third parties also played an important role. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the hosting of the event by Israel attracted widespread criticism of ‘sport-washing’ and RCS Mediagroup was the target of a campaign aimed at cancelling the three days held in Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Plus an undisclosed amount in sponsors from private sponsors. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A Human Rights Watch report providing a detailed account of the situation was published in 2016 and is available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/09/25/israel/palestine-fifa-sponsoring-games-seized-land> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It is worth noting how, despite the formal independence of football federations from their governments, geopolitical considerations play an important role in FIFA’s decision making process and can partially explain the decision by Blatter and later Infantino to intervene and prevent any consequence for the IFA. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The case of UEFA has also been discussed on several occasions at the European Parliament. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)