

## **Sport, Diplomacy, and Influence. What is the Impact of Sport within Diplomacy and History of International Relations?**

### **Session: States, Diplomacy, and Sports**

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### **Israel's Use of Sports for Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy**

The purpose of this presentation is to discuss the intersection between sports, nation branding and public diplomacy, amid Israel's deteriorating country image. After Israel's independence in 1948 and through its first two decades, the country enjoyed a positive international image, being framed as "David", the unlikely underdog state, who was founded by holocaust survivors and strives in a hostile region. Yet, since the 1967 Six Days War, when Israel tripled its size including conquering Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Israel's image shifted towards being the "Goliath", and international sympathy gradually shifted towards the Palestinians. The lack of a permanent peace agreement and the occupation of Palestinians, the ongoing rounds of violence, and the polarizing nature of the Israeli-Arab conflict, impact how Israel uses sports for nation branding and public diplomacy purposes.

There are two main historic narratives that shaped the intersection between sports, nation branding and public diplomacy, and the State of Israel. The first is the connection between sports and physical activity and Zionism – the national movement of Jewish people, amid the growing antisemitism in Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The term Muscular Judaism was coined by Dr. Max Nordau in the second Zionist Congress in 1898, calling the need to shift the image of the

Jewish people in Europe from torah-learning segregated communities, and create a new proactive Jew, who will build and defend the future homeland. That led to creation of Jewish sports clubs, and the establishment of the Maccabi Movement and the Maccabiah Games, a quadrennial international multi-sport event for Jewish people, that since Israel's independence in 1948 served purposes of nation building, public diplomacy, and nation branding. Thus, the connection between sports and the idea of Israel being a Jewish homeland, is very much integrated in the history of Zionism and shaped sports in Israel ever since the country's independence.

The second narrative that shapes Israeli sports diplomacy is the Israeli-Arab dispute, as international politics often overshadowed Israel's participation in international sports and prevented the country's ability to maximize sports as a soft power tool. For example, Israel's exclusion by Arab and Muslim countries from participating in Asian federations and forcing Israeli sports organizations to compete in different continents, until officially being accepted to the European ones in the 1990s. Other manifestations include boycotts, calls for sanctions against Israel, Israeli sports clubs and associations hosting abroad when violence escalate, and even terrorism. The Munich Massacre – the terror attack during the Munich 1972 Olympic Games, in which Palestinian terrorists kidnapped and murdered 11 Israeli athletes, coaches, and referees – is still a national trauma and a source of controversy. Half a century later, the massacre is a double-edged sword for Israel's public diplomacy, as on one hand the commemorations of the victims enable Israeli politicians to position the country among the western world that faces terrorism. On the other hand, by focusing on the massacre, the discussion about Israel in international sports remains in the context of a polarizing armed dispute. Thus, geopolitics tactically change and impact how Israel can use sports for nation branding and public diplomacy.

In recent decades, Israel's public diplomacy shifted from Hasbara, a mostly apologetic advocacy tactic to explain military actions of the country or why Israel has the right to defend itself, to trying to create bypassing messages to the Israeli-Arab dispute, that foster collaboration and interests. One of these attempts is the branding of Israel as Start-Up Nation, and a technological hub of creativity and innovation, that is rooted in the history of the country's need and ability to adapt. The last few years also manifested through a growing sport-tech ecosystem, which is embraced by the state, sports organizations, start-up companies, and private citizens, all seeing value in the branding of Israel as a creative and innovative, fostering relations with international markets. Thus, traditional public diplomacy, corporate diplomacy, and people-to-people diplomacy, are all authentically integrated in Israel's sport-tech diplomacy. This presentation discusses the challenges and complexities of Israel of using sports for nation branding and public diplomacy, through connections to the Zionist Movement and antisemitism, manifestations of the Israeli-Arab dispute including the growing backlash over occupation of Palestinians, accusations of sportswashing, naturalization of athletes, representation in international events, and sport-tech diplomacy. The presentation is significant for scholars and practitioners analyzing the use of sports for nation branding and public diplomacy not just in the contexts of Israel or the Middle East, but amid countries going prolong geopolitical conflicts and armed disputes.

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### **About the author:**

Dr. Yoav Dubinsky is an Instructor of Sports Business in the Lundquist College of Business at the University of Oregon. He did his PhD at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville on “Israel’s use of sports for nation branding and public diplomacy”. Born and raised in Tel-Aviv, Israel, Dubinsky is a sports researcher and a former sports journalist with almost two decades of experience covering and researching local, national, and international sports. His interdisciplinary scholarship focuses on sports, nation branding, public diplomacy, and country image and especially how countries, cities, and communities try to improve their images and reputations through sports. As a journalist, he has covered hundreds of sports events around the

world. Focusing on the Olympic Movement, Dubinsky has covered or researched the Olympic Games from Beijing, London, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo. He has been involved with the International Olympic Academy as a lecturer, a coordinator, and a student, using sports as a tool for inclusion in diverse international environments.

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