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The sporting arena as a public diplomacy battlefield: the Palestinian attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA

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ABSTRACT

Conflicts today are very much battles of ideas. Alongside the military confrontations, an ‘Image War’ is taking place. The goal of the current study was to examine the usage of the international sports arena as a public diplomacy tool, through which political actors try to promote their goals by attracting public attention to their claims. More specifically, we examine an attack on a country’s image through the arena of sports – the Palestinian Football Association’s attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA in 2015 – and Israel’s reaction to the attack. Our findings indicate that this move had limited success in terms raising the attention of the international media to the Palestinians’ claims against Israel, both in terms of the amount of coverage the topic received and in the ways in which the issue was framed. Although the Palestinian attempt was not very successful, either in raising attention to their political goals or in suspending Israel from FIFA, it emphasises the ways in which conflicts had changed and the importance of images in the information age we live in.

KEYWORDS

Conflicts; Image War; sports; Israeli–Palestinian conflict; foreign press

Politics will shape the information revolution as much as vice versa.

(Keohane and Nye 1998, p. 85)

Introduction

Contemporary conflicts are significantly different to those of only a few decades ago. Alongside the military confrontation, another battle is taking place – the ‘Image War’, in which each side attempts to be perceived as the just side, and delegitimise its adversary (Van Evera 2006, Archetti 2010, Yarchi *et al.* 2013). Many states find themselves fighting non-state actors (NSAs), and the state loses in almost every case (Lind 2004). In asymmetric conflicts, state actors cannot always achieve their objectives despite their combat capabilities (Sullivan 2007), due to the internal and external constraints they face (Merom 2003, Blum 2013). In those conflicts, information transmitted to the public, in many cases

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through the media, has significant implications. The fighting zone has shifted from an actual territory – the battlefield – to the mass media in order to impact public opinion (Ayalon *et al.* 2016, Yarchi 2016). Keohane and Nye (1998) argued that security and force now matter less than social–political relationships between states.

In today's reality, the image of political actors in the international arena plays a significant role in their ability to achieve their goals. This understanding has led many leaders and nations to invest considerable resources into public diplomacy (Nye and Owens 1996, Kunczik 1997, Wang 2006). Public diplomacy, which serves political actors in their attempts to impact their international image, is composed of the relationship between policymakers, the media, and the public. The media plays a significant role in determining public opinion regarding foreign affairs, and public opinion affects foreign policymaking (Soroka 2003). Consequently, gaining favourable media attention could help political actors achieve public support and 'win over the hearts and minds'.

Soft power, as it appears in political actors' culture and values, is an important aspect in countries' image creation process in the international arena and in the attraction it projects. Sport, which can be seen as a part of states' soft power, can also serve as a public diplomacy tool (Reiche 2015, Samuel-Azran *et al.* 2016). In the current paper, we have chosen to focus on a less studied fighting zone, which emphasises the important role the 'Image War' plays in today's conflicts – the battle over political actors' legitimacy in the international sporting arena. This study examines an attack on a country's image through sports, as well as the ways in which that country reacted, and the degree to which each side successfully presented its arguments in the foreign press. We focus on the Palestinian Football Association's (PFA) attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA on 24 March 2015, Israel's response, and the ways in which the topic was covered in the foreign press.

Public diplomacy and soft power

Dramatic changes in the international relations arena, the communication revolution, globalisation, and the need to promote one's policies through public opinion have resulted in a new type of diplomacy – 'Public Diplomacy'. Its practice became substantial during the Cold War, where many campaigns tried to raise public opinion to support nuclear weapon proliferation and the ideological struggle of people around the world. It entered a new phase after 11 September 2001, when the United States could not adequately respond to terrorism by itself, and was instead dependent on the cooperation of other countries (Gilboa 2008, Nye 2008).

Malone (1985) described public diplomacy as the direct communication with foreign publics in order to affect their thinking, and eventually impact governments and policies. The context in which contemporary international relations

take place is not characterised by the interaction among states only. Access to global communications has empowered a wide range of political actors (Archetti 2010, Yarchi 2014). Accordingly, Signitzer and Coombs (1992) expanded the definition of public diplomacy by recognising new actors in the international relations arena; they referred to public diplomacy as the way in which state actors and NSAs try to directly or indirectly impact public attitudes and opinions, which in turn influences governments' foreign policies.

Political actors attempt to promote their preferred messages and frames to the international media in order to create a favourable image. The ability to transmit these frames to the foreign press is extremely significant, as information obtained through the media is likely to influence how publics and governments perceive the events, especially in the case of foreign news, where the public has less knowledge and experience (Manheim 1994, Wolfsfeld 1997). Avraham and Ketter (2008) argued that the international image of a place is important because it has an impact on people's decisions about where to live, travel, invest, study, or which country to support during a conflict. Public diplomacy scholars (e.g., Malone 1985, Gilboa 2008) have argued that a place's image affects public opinion, which in turn influences foreign policies towards different political actors. Many elements beyond political actors' control can affect their image (Avraham and Ketter 2008).

The technological revolution had created a new reality in political actors' ability to promote their messages; global networks and the internet had become the main sources of information around the world. The internet, in particular, had provided individuals and actors' with the ability to share information across the globe instantly at a low cost. It has also helped to coordinate actions and unite people even when they are located at a great geographical distance. It had improved the ability of NSAs to communicate with the public, including foreign audiences (Keohane and Nye 1998, Weimann 2006, Gilboa 2008). In terms of asymmetric conflicts, this change led to a rebalancing strategy usually used by NSAs that forces states to adjust to the new age of modern conflict and the digital age (Ayalon *et al.* 2016).

Nye (2008) developed the concept of 'soft power', understanding that a country's culture plays a part in its image and attraction in the international arena. The essence of soft power is its ability to shape different actor's preferences and influence decision-making, and thus affect policies. This ability derives from the intangible assets of an actor, such as its culture, political values, institutions, legitimate policy, and moral authority. Soft power is more than just persuasion or the capability to change one's opinions (since preaching is not believed to be the best way to convert public opinion); it also involves the ability to attract other political actors and achieve sympathy – an attractive image makes other actors become closer and collaborate. Attraction was found to have a greater impact than coercion or constraint. In times when the

policies of one actor are seen as legitimate in the eyes of others, its soft power is strengthened (Keohane and Nye 1998).

Sport as a soft power tool

National sporting performance can contribute to the domestic and international image of a country by its potential to unify, create national identity and pride, encourage foreign investments, and improve tourism. Sport offers countries the opportunity to compete with each other and gain international prestige by means other than military force or economic power. As stated, soft power enables political actors to be perceived as attractive in the international arena. Sport can be considered as a soft power tool since it can highlight a country's culture and values, and influence the ways it is perceived by publics around the world (Reiche 2015). Hence, sport has become a foreign policy tool; it can be seen as part of political actors' soft power strategy.

Hosting huge sporting events like the Olympics or FIFA games helps improve a nation's image by raising the publicity and awareness of a country in the international media. It allows a nation to showcase itself, spread its language, heritage, culture, and, as a result of the honored position of hosting such an important international events, attract tourism (Grix 2013, Grix and Brannagan 2016). Several governments have claimed that the strategy of hosting major sport events is highly effective (Samuel-Azran *et al.* 2016). For example, the 2000 Sydney Olympics raised Australia's image as a 'sporting nation'. According to the Australian Tourist Commission (2001), Australia was rarely seen on the world stage. Hosting the Olympics gave Australia the chance to compete in terms of global interest and awareness, 'Australia now has a permanent seat on the world stage and the tourism industry is reaping the benefits' (p. 2). Another example was the 2012 Olympic Games in London. The United Kingdom Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) report concluded that the UK's image is generally positive, seen as 'fair, innovative, diverse, confident and stylish', but also as 'arrogant, stuffy, old-fashioned and cold'. The FCO wanted to showcase modern Britain as the 'open' (welcoming, diverse, tolerant), connected (through involvement in the UN and G20, politically, geographically, in terms of trade and travel), creative and dynamic place it really is (House of Commons para. 20, 2011). Grix and Houlihan (2014) argued that the Olympic Games had contributed positively to the achievement objectives mentioned above; their study has concluded that the international media's response to the London 2012 Olympics was strongly positive, and assisted the UK in showcasing and branding itself.

However, states might occasionally create, or enlarge, a negative global image by hosting sport events – in those cases, soft power strategy can have a negative effect on that country's image. China and Russia have tried to promote their respective images by hosting the Olympic Games, although the international

media often concentrated on their misdeeds during the preparation and throughout the games (Samuel-Azran *et al.* 2016). During China's hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympic Games, the international media mainly covered protesters marching with the demands to free Tibet, as well as allegations of environmental organisations regarding air pollution around the city of Beijing and the area (Manzenreiter 2010). In the case of Russia, while hosting the 2014 Olympic Winter Games, President Putin linked gay people to pedophilia. Two days before the start of the games, gay rights activists held rallies against the Russian government in 19 cities around the world, which attracted a great deal of international coverage and foiled Russian efforts to promote their image. Qatar is another interesting case. It became a major actor in the field of sport, but was accused in the international arena of sponsoring terror organisations (Mandick 2015), and giving financial assistance to groups like The Muslim Brotherhood, al-Nusrah Front, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, and ISIS. The country was labelled 'Club Med for terrorists' in *The New York Times* op-ed (Prosor 2014). Qatar tried to improve its image by sponsoring major events and teams through the Qatari Sport Investments. It hosted no fewer than 89 major sporting events during 2015, and won the rights to host the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Qatar also funds the Aspire Academy, which trains talented young football players from around the world. Among Qatar's top acquisitions can be found holdings in the Paris Saint-Germain FC football club in France and the partnership with FC Barcelona (Conn 2013). Samuel-Azran *et al.* (2016) analysed the sentiment towards Qatar at sport versus terror on three international media networks: CNN, SKY News, and ITV. They found that sport-related articles received a significantly negative tone, as a result of the FIFA bid bribery allegations case for hosting the 2022 World Cup on the one hand, and the 2013 Amnesty International report on Qatar's human rights violations of migrant workers building the stadiums for the 2022 World Cup on the other hand. The study strengthens previous analyses that found that countries with controversial images do not necessarily benefit from using sport as a soft power tool when trying to improve their image.

So far, we have witnessed the use of sport as a soft power tool in an attempt to improve the image of political actors (primarily countries) in the international arena. The current paper examines a case study that introduces a new approach: using sport as a tool for damaging the image of a political actor. We will now present our case study: the PFA's attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA in 2015 and the Israeli response. There have been cases in the past in which international organisations have suspended countries from international sports associations (e.g. South Africa during the Apartheid era and Yugoslavia during the 1990s), but our case study is unique in the sense that a political actor directly involved in a conflict uses the international sport arena to attack its adversary.

The case study

On 24 March 2015 The PFA submitted a formal request in attempt to suspend the Israeli Football Association (IFA) from FIFA, the sport's global governing body. This request came after numerous events and attempts in the previous few years to deal with the complex relations between the Palestinian and the Israeli federations. The Palestinian association requested the immediate removal of Israel from any international football activities.

Prior to the 2015 Palestinian request, during the 2013 FIFA Congress, the president of the PFA, Dr Jibril Rajoub, who is also a member of the Central Committee of the West Bank's ruling Fatah party, requested that FIFA would discuss issues concerning the football situation in the Palestinian Authority. Rajoub dedicated his speech to the difficulty of free movement of Palestinian football players and recommended sanctioning those who do not comply with FIFA's Statutes (63rd FIFA Congress, 2013, p. 41). As a result, FIFA had established a task force led by FIFA's former president, Joseph S. ('Sepp') Blatter. The outcome of the task force meetings, held on September 2013, was that the IFA and the PFA had agreed on certain parameters that would facilitate the movement of players, officials, and equipment into, out of, and within the Palestinian Authority. Those parameters were approved by the FIFA Executive Committee during its October 2013 meeting.

During the 2014 FIFA Congress, it was proposed that an independent individual or committee was to be appointed in order to monitor the progress made, and to submit a report to the Executive Committee in December 2014. The Israelis and Palestinians had both accepted the proposal. While accepting the congress proposal, Dr Rajoub had raised more allegations against Israel:

although the PFA had accepted the established arrangements (Circular no.1385) for the sake of goodwill and had fully cooperated with all parties involved, unfortunately the mechanism had produced no real change on the ground due to the timid stance assumed by the IFA against racism and discrimination in areas under its jurisdiction.

Rajoub also noted a number of instances in which players from the Palestinian Authority and other countries were denied permission to travel to tournaments in and out of the Palestinian Authority. He also claimed that, in the previous months, Palestinian players had been injured, arrested and even killed by Israeli forces (64th FIFA Congress, 2014, p. 23).

On June 2014, Costakis Koutsokoumnis, president of the Cyprus Football Association, was appointed as an observer for the implementation of Circular 1385. Koutsokoumnis had visited Israel and the Palestinian Authority three times before handing his report on December 2014. The report expressed satisfaction on the progress achieved, while emphasising that the ultimate objective is full implementation of the circular. The Executive Committee decided to invite other Israeli and Palestinian bodies involved in approving movement requests to

take apart in a working group alongside the PFA, IFA, and FIFA, in order to ensure full implementation of the mentioned circular.

On 24 March 2015, a week after the Israeli elections and two months before FIFA's 2015 annual congress, the PFA submitted a formal request to suspend IFA from all international football games. The PFA request included the following accusations: (1) Israel was restricting the movement of players and equipment into and out of the Palestinian territories; (2) IFA was discriminating on racial bases; and (3) five Israeli clubs were playing on an occupied Palestinian territory.

In response, and as part of its attempt to remove the Palestinian request from FIFA's agenda, the IFA had claimed that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority was political and that the PFA's attempts to mix politics and sport contravened FIFA's policy. Furthermore, the IFA did not violate any of FIFA's statutes and had cooperated and would continue cooperating with each of FIFA initiatives in the matter of movement of Palestinian athletes. As evidence, the Cypriot observer report did not criticise IFA – it concluded that the IFA had done everything within its power to provide movement of Palestinian athletes and equipment. In addition, like other football associations around the world, the IFA could not and was unable to address political and security issues. The government of Israel, the military and other Israeli authorities had greatly improved the issue of Palestinian athletes' movement, and the few incidents of refusal were the result of security matters. The IFA emphasised that the game of football needs to connect people rather than divide them, and that the sporting world had understood that boycotts are not the solution and had avoided them for decades. The IFA claimed that it fights to end racism and works to bring Jews and Arabs together. The IFA's various offers to hold friendly matches between Palestinian and Israeli groups, among all ages, were denied by the Palestinians.

Israel's efforts to counter this Palestinian attempt were aimed at various arenas: on the international/political aspects, the Israelis had worked to raise support among different Foreign Affairs Offices, Olympic Committees, and football associations worldwide. The IFA had established a forum composed of famous Israeli athletes and world-renowned Jews who used their personal and professional networks to influence the federations' presidents. The IFA had conducted meetings with officials in FIFA and UEFA (Union of European Football Associations) in an attempt to affect the decision makers on the matter at hand. On the legal aspects – the IFA had tried to lead to a procedural prevention of the request during the Congress, at the same time as preparing the legal basis to appeal in case the request achieved a majority.

To intensify the campaign, and to attract international attention, the IFA had used local and foreign media, sport channels and general news outlets, social networks, and had initiated campaigns by Jewish communities around the world in an attempt to present the Israeli arguments.

After much effort, following days of negotiations, and discussions between the delegations and political echelons, the PFA decided to withdraw its proposal at the last minute during the FIFA 2015 congress in Zurich. An international committee was established in order to examine the Palestinian claims.

In addition to presenting this unique case study of a political actor using the sporting arena in an attempt to call attention to its political claims, we wish to examine the degree to which the Palestinians were successful in damaging Israel's image in the international arena (while covering the topic in the foreign press), and the degree to which the Israelis were successful at preventing it.

Method

In order to achieve the study's goals, we conducted a quantitative content analysis. We analysed the actors' messages and arguments as they appear in the news coverage of six newspapers around the world (published in English): *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times* (in the US), *The Guardian*, *The Times of London* (in the UK), and *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* (in India).

The news stories were retrieved using the Lexis-Nexis database. All the stories that appeared between 24 March 2015 (the day the PFA submitted its formal request to suspend the IFA from FIFA) and 6 June 2015 (a week after the PFA had decided to withdraw its proposal on May 29 and met our search terms (included the terms 'Israel' and 'FIFA') were downloaded (49 articles in total were retrieved). Only 36 of those news stories had actually dealt with our case study; those news articles were included in our analysis.

In an attempt to examine the effectiveness of the Palestinian campaign, at the first stage of the analysis we identified the political actors' arguments (both Palestinians and Israelis) in the news stories. Next, each news story was coded on a five-point scale (from the most pro-Israeli news stories to the most pro-Palestinian ones): (1) stories that presented support for Israel and opposed the Palestinians – those articles that contained only Israeli messages/arguments and criticised the Palestinians; (2) stories that presented support for Israel or opposed the Palestinians – those articles that contained a majority of Israeli messages/arguments over Palestinian one; (3) neutral stories – articles that mentioned the same amount of messages/arguments of each of the sides, or mentioned the issue but did not cover the messages/arguments; (4) stories that presented support for the Palestinians or opposed Israel – those articles that contained a majority of Palestinian messages/arguments over Israelis; and (5) stories that presented support for the Palestinians and opposed Israel – those articles that contained only Palestinian messages/arguments and criticised the Israelis.

The articles were coded by two coders who had undergone training. A reliability test based on a random sample of 13 articles showed a high level of inter-coder agreement (Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient no lower than .91).

Results

First and foremost, our analysis reveals that the Palestinians' attempts to raise their claims against Israel to the international agenda through the arena of sport was only partially successful, as the topic did not receive extensive media coverage from the international press. In the 6 newspapers examined, only 36 articles had dealt with the Palestinian request to suspend the IFA from FIFA, over a time frame of two-and-a-half months. In terms of countries and newspapers, 18 of the news stories appeared in the American press (11 in *The New York Times*, and 7 in *The Washington Post*), 14 in the British press (13 in *The Guardian*, and only 1 in *The Times*); 4 stories were published in *The Times of India* and the issue was not mentioned at all in *The Hindu*.

In addition to the limited coverage, the evidence shows that the topic did not receive any media attention at the time that the PFA had submitted its request in March of 2015, and was discussed by the media mostly in relation to the FIFA Congress in May 2015 (in which the decision about the request was supposed to be made). The first coverage of the topic appeared in *The Times of India* on 2 May 2015, over a month after the PFA request was submitted (on March 24). Most of the media coverage occurred between May 20 and May 30, 10 days prior to the 65th annual FIFA congress and one day afterwards. The day with the most coverage was 29 May 2015 – the day the congress was held; 10 news stories were published on the topic on that day.

Our analysis now turns to the content of the coverage, in order to learn about the ability of both the Palestinians and Israelis to present their arguments on a five-point scale from the most pro-Israeli (1) to the most pro-Palestinian (5) coverage. Table 1 presents the coverage according to newspaper.

As presented in Table 1, for the most part the coverage was fairly neutral, leaning towards a more pro-Palestinian coverage ($M = 3.33$). The only exception was *The Washington Post*, which presented a more pro-Israeli coverage ($M = 2.57$); none of the stories in *The Washington Post* presented pro-Palestinian coverage. None of the stories published had presented a strongly pro-Israeli view (presenting support for Israel and opposing the Palestinians). In addition, *The New York Times* and *The Times* did not present any pro-Israeli articles in their coverage. No significant differences in coverage were found between the various newspapers examined.¹

Table 1. The coverage scale according to newspaper.

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
<i>The New York Times</i>	11	3.55	0.69	3–5
<i>The Washington Post</i>	7	2.57	0.53	2–3
<i>The Guardian</i>	13	3.46	1.20	2–5
<i>The Times (London)</i>	1	4	–	–
<i>The Times of India</i>	4	3.5	1	2–4
Total	36	3.33	0.96	2–5

In summary, the Palestinian attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA had only limited success in terms of raising Palestinian claims on the international news agenda. The topic did not receive extensive coverage by the foreign press and the coverage was only slightly pro-Palestinian (almost neutral) in terms of the ability of both sides to present their arguments in the coverage.

Conclusions

Sport is part of the culture of many nations – it serves as part of countries' national identity, national pride, and on the international level as part of the soft power they project (Reiche 2015, Tamir *et al.* 2015, Samuel-Azran *et al.* 2016). The current study sought to examine the usage of the international sports arena as a public diplomacy tool, through which political actors try to promote their goals by raising public attention to their claims. More specifically, we examined an attack on a country's image through the sporting arena and the reaction of that country to the attack, while focusing on the PFA's attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA in 2015.

Our findings indicate that the Palestinian success in raising attention to its claims against Israel through the attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA was limited – the issue did not receive extensive coverage by the foreign press (we found only 36 articles in the 6 newspapers we had examined, over a period of about three and a half months), and the coverage was only slightly pro-Palestinian (almost neutral) in terms of the ability of both sides to present their arguments in the coverage. The findings suggest that in terms of receiving international attention on the one hand, and creating greater empathy towards the Palestinian people through raising their claims against Israel on the other hand, a political attack through the sporting arena (or more specifically FIFA) was not very successful for the Palestinians. It is possible that the Palestinians had other goals than raising international awareness, and may have been more successful in those arenas. Public diplomacy scholars (e.g., Cull 2010) have claimed that political actors sometimes engage with international publics, and try to use the advantages of public diplomacy, in an attempt to impress their domestic audiences by showing their own public they are working hard to promote their political goals in the international arena. It is possible that part of the goals of the Palestinian leadership in their attempt to suspend Israel from FIFA was to prove to their own people that they are doing everything they can to promote Palestinian claims in the international arena.

In the current case study, it appears that the power of traditional diplomacy had played a more salient role. Israel was able to gain support from FIFA officials through more traditional means, which led the Palestinians to redraw their request before the vote on FIFA's congress. Although we tend to place great importance on the role of public diplomacy in our digital age (Gilboa 2001), the current case study exhibits that traditional diplomacy still plays a crucial

role in international relations. Another possible explanation, other than Israel's traditional diplomacy efforts, could be the nature of FIFA; as an organisation, FIFA declares it does not deal with politics but rather uses sports to unite people. This policy may lead FIFA officials to find a different solution to the Palestinian claims raised by PFA and avoid voting on the suspension of Israel from the organisation.

In the current case study, the Palestinians were not successful in either raising attention to their political goals or in suspending Israel from FIFA. However, their attempt emphasises the ways in which conflicts had changed, and the importance of images in the information age we live in. Conflicts today are largely battles of ideas and the information designed by the media. Alongside the military confrontations, an Image War is taking part in which each side tries to justify its ideas, beliefs, and actions (Van-Evera 2006, Yarchi 2016). Studying different areas (such as sports) that political actors use in their attempt to promote their narrative and fight their adversaries in the international arena can help us gain a better understanding of the Image War. Future studies can look into other arenas in which this battle of ideas is taking place.

Note

1. [$F_{(3,31)} = 1.887; N.S.$].

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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