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‘Play and shut up’: the silencing of Palestinian athletes in Israeli media

Eran Shor and Yuval Yonay

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Abstract

In this paper we contrast two opposing theoretical views in the sociology of sport. The first sees sport as a field that brings together different groups and bridges social divides. In this view, minority sport stars serve both as role models and as a mouthpiece voicing the feelings and needs of their ethnic groups. The opposing view holds that the sport field reflects the tendencies of the larger society, helping to maintain the social dominance of hegemonic groups. In this view sport stars serve mostly as tokens and have no real influence on the social order. Our systematic analysis of Israeli media between the years 2002 and 2007 lends support to the latter view. We show that the expressions and behaviours of Israeli Palestinian soccer players are consistently policed and silenced by the Jewish-dominated media discourse, effectively blocking one of the few channels of expression for the Arab public in Israel.

Keywords: Israel; sports; Palestine; media; citizenship; discourse.

Introduction

On 26 March 2005 Abbas Suan, a Palestinian soccer player from Sakhnin, scored a last-minute equalizer for the Israeli national team in its home game against the Irish national team, keeping up Israel’s hopes of reaching the 2006 World Cup games. Four days later, Walid Bdeir, another Palestinian player from Kafr Qasim, also scored an equalizer against the French national team. Suan and Bdeir were instantly hailed by many as symbols of the coexistence between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Writers anticipated that these goals would ‘open up the gates for Israeli Arabs’, exploiting the Hebrew pun on Shearim that means both goals and gates. Even the racist slogan ein Aravim, ein piguim (no Arabs, no terrorism), delegitimizing the existence of Israeli...
Arabs, was momentarily replaced by *ein Aravim, ein shearim* (no Arabs, no goals).

Have the goals of Suan and Bdeir really opened up the gates for the Arab public? Has athletic success helped Palestinian players find an open ear among the Jewish public, legitimizing the discussion of issues and problems that are relevant to the Arab public in Israel? We examine these questions by looking at the coverage of Palestinian soccer players in the Hebrew media. Specifically, we focus on the media and public responses to the political statements of these players. While some scholars believe that sports contribute to bridging social divides and promoting minority groups, others suggest that the field of sport reflects and reinforces the power relations in society. Sorek (2007) found that Palestinians perceive their participation and success in major soccer clubs and the national team as an ‘integrative enclave’, which they hope to expand to other social spheres. Yet he explains that such a possibility depends on the Jewish majority’s response. Our systematic examination of newspaper articles, TV programmes and internet websites in 2002–7 demonstrates that the Jewish majority zealously blocks this option.

We show that the Palestinian players are expected to exhibit their unconditional loyalty and commitment to the national team and their clubs. When they express a consensual vision of coexistence and assimilation they are enthusiastically commended for it. However, when they talk about their hybrid Israeli-Palestinian identity and bring forward the demands of the Arab public, they are scolded and silenced. Both journalists and internet surfers cite the importance of keeping ‘clean sports’ separate from ‘dirty politics’ and demand that the players cease bringing up issues about which they ‘know nothing’ or ‘have no moral authority to talk’. We show that these silencing practices are effective in making the Palestinian players very cautious and prevent them from expressing the feelings and opinions of the Israeli Arab public.

*Minority sport stars and their impact on the social order*

Traditional views in the sociology of sport see sport as the ‘modern secular religion’, which, according to Durkheimian thinking, must develop in every modern society in order to preserve its sense of unity and cohesiveness (Coles 1975). Janet Lever (1983) suggests that through sport different groups in society may find a way to come together and bridge their differences and divides. Sport, in this line of thought, promotes ethnic and racial integration; through it minority groups gain visibility and become part of the collective, while also improving their social, political and economic standing (Carrington 1986). In this view, minority sport stars serve both as role models, marking the way to
success and self fulfilment, and as genuine representatives of their public who voice the authentic views, grievances and demands of the disadvantaged groups to which they belong.\textsuperscript{2}

Contrary to this optimistic view, recent studies suggest that sport often contributes to the exacerbation of ethnic tensions. Krouwel \textit{et al.} (2006) for example, found that in the Netherlands soccer competitions mainly reinforce ethnic divisions and homogeneity rather than bridging these divides and serving as a cultural crossover. Taking a Gramscian perspective, some scholars have suggested that sport is a site of contested cultural practices, used by elite groups to maintain and fortify their social dominance (e.g. Hargreaves 1986; Sugden and Tomlinson 2002). Others have shown that relations of subordination, discrimination and oppression that characterize the larger society also penetrate the sport field (McKay 1990; Bale and Cronin 2002).

In Israel, despite this growing body of scholarly work, there are still many who believe that sport provides Israeli minorities with an opportunity to improve their political and economic position. Those who hold this view contend that, through participation and success in sports, especially soccer, the large Arab minority takes a significant role in Israeli society and achieves greater equality and integration. Hagai Harif (2003), for example, argues that sport may serve as a cure for the tensions between Jews and Arabs in Israel and help improve the latter’s social and economic position:

[Arab] soccer players . . . successfully integrated into the national soccer team, wore the national uniform, and stood at attention when the national anthem was played. . . . This shows that despite the adversities they face, Arabs in Israel are able to attain equal opportunities. (Harif 2003, p. 9)\textsuperscript{3}

Yet other scholars and pundits hold a contrary view, maintaining that Israeli sport is first and foremost a field where power relations prevail, a field that aids the dominant ethnic group, the Jews, to maintain their hegemony. Tamir Sorek (2007) claims that for years the state has used Arab soccer as a ‘stabilizing mechanism’ to control the Arab population. Zouheir Bahloul, a veteran Israeli Arab sports commentator and journalist, talks about the relatively successful penetration of Palestinian players into the high levels of Israeli soccer as ‘exemplary escapism’: it provides an alternative and disconnected life for the very few successful players but has no impact on the position of Arabs as a group (2003, p. 84).

We test these opposing views by analysing sports coverage in the mass media. We examine the extent to which Israeli Palestinian citizens are able to penetrate and affect the public sphere using their athletic success. More specifically, we focus on the ability of
Palestinian sport stars to contribute to the media and public debate over contentious political issues. By following the media and public response to political statements and expressions of Palestinian players we try to assess the latter’s ability to bring forward issues of importance for the Arab public.

Israeli Palestinian soccer players

The Israeli Palestinians are locals, born and raised Israeli citizens, but the Jewish dominance in Israeli society and the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people turned them into second-class citizens in their own homeland. Most Jews hold hostile views towards the Palestinian minority, and even official rhetoric often portrays them as a security and demographic threat. As a consequence, Arab citizens are excluded from both material and symbolic goods and suffer from civil discrimination. While in the 1990s, following the Oslo Accords and the progress in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, one could trace the first signs of improvement in the public and political stance of the Arab minority, in recent years the Jewish tendencies of Israel have been growing stronger, and calls for the exclusion of Palestinians from the Israeli collective are on the rise (e.g. Rouhana 1997; Kraus and Yonay 2000; Bar-Tal and Teichman 2005).

Israeli Palestinians managed to reach the higher levels of Israeli soccer. During the years 2002–7 between fifteen and thirty Palestinians played each season in the major league. A few of them have been summoned to the national team. In addition, three Arab teams advanced to the major Israeli soccer league. Two (Hapoel Taibe, Maccabi Akha Nazareth) stayed there briefly, while the third, Abnaa Sakhnin has become an integral part of Israeli premier league and reached notable achievements.

Numerous studies worldwide (e.g. Hartman and Husband 1974; Entman 1990) and in Israel (e.g. Lemish 2000; Avraham 2003) demonstrate the exclusion and misrepresentation of minority groups in the media. While sport provides ethnic minorities with high visibility, research shows that this is also a field where biased representation is very prevalent (e.g. Hoberman 1997; Stone et al. 1999). Still, sport is one of the few fields in which the Arab minority receives media exposure of any sort (Aburaiya, Avraham and Wolfsfeld 1998).

Research into sports and into Palestinian soccer in Israel has substantially accelerated in recent years (e.g. Ben-Porat and Ben-Porat 2004; Shor 2008). In the most thorough and encompassing of these studies, Tamir Sorek (2007) examined various aspects of Arab soccer in Israel, including its historical roots and development, its municipal
financial support, the identity of Arab athletes and fans and the discourse of the Arab sports newspapers. Sorek’s main conclusion is that soccer serves as what he calls ‘an integrative enclave’ – ‘a social sphere that is ruled by a liberal-integrative discourse of citizenship’ (2007, p. 2). According to many of his interviewees, soccer has had a functional role in Arab society, bringing people together and disciplining the youth, and it has rarely served as a stage for national protest.

While his findings are important and illuminating, Sorek has focused on the meaning of soccer for the Arab citizens of Israel and its potential for Arab-Jewish integration. While briefly discussing the response of the Jewish majority to the attempts made by the Arab minority to use soccer as an integrative mechanism, Sorek did not systematically analyse the Israeli-Jewish discourse. He thus concluded his study with a call for such a systematic study. Our study is the first to take on this challenge. We thus add an important piece to the puzzle by showing the ways in which political protest, in the few cases when it does occur, is silenced in one of the most important Israeli public spheres – the Hebrew media.

Methodology

Sampling

We examined all the articles and interviews dealing with Israeli Palestinian players in the major men’s soccer league, which appeared in Hebrew newspapers, television channels and internet sites during four consecutive seasons between July 2002 and June 2007. Data were systematically gathered from:

1. **Daily newspapers** Articles and interviews were collected from the three major Hebrew daily newspapers: Yediot Ahronot, Maariv and Haaretz. In addition, all the weekly Maariv-chain local newspapers were thoroughly searched for relevant articles.

2. **Television channels** Reports and interviews were gathered from the following channels: Channel 1, Channel 2, Channel 5 and Channel 5+. The first two are general channels, carrying daily sports news reports. Channels 5 and 5+ are sports channels, both broadcasting daily half-hour sports news magazines.

3. **Internet websites** Daily articles and interviews from the following websites were examined: Sport5.co.il, One.co.il, Ynet.co.il, NRG.co.il and Haaretz.co.il. The first two sites on this list are exclusively devoted to sport. The last three are general news sites, operated by, but separate from, the three major printed Israeli
dailies. Each of these websites includes a substantial section dedicated to sports.

4. Internet surfers’ talkbacks In addition to articles and interviews, the internet makes it possible to follow surfers’ responses to articles and news, often referred to in the literature as ‘talkbacks’ (e.g. Hecht 2003; Sikron et al. 2008). Talkbacks are short interactive responses, something of a mix between a chat, a forum and a blog, mostly appearing at the end of articles (Kohn and Neiger 2007). The talkbacks phenomenon has won great popularity in Israel and in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand and Poland, but is less prevalent in Western Europe and North America. While many English forums and blogs offer readers an opportunity to respond, this option is not available in most major online journals and newspapers in the English language.

The relatively new talkbacks phenomenon has yet to be thoroughly examined by media scholars. Studies show that readers who write responses to printed newspapers tend to express resolved and often extreme stands regarding controversial issues (Eyal 1983). Internet talkbacks should therefore be treated carefully and not be considered as representative of public currents and views. Still, talkbacks are undoubtedly an important part of today’s public discourse. Internet surfers are exposed to them and might be affected by them in much the same way they are affected by articles published in newspapers or appearing on the web. One may even argue that, since they are commonly perceived as representing the ‘voice of the people’ rather than that of the elites, talkbacks may have an even greater effect on some publics than the articles they follow.

Talkbacks enable surfers to become part of the knowledge-producing community, while preserving their anonymity if they wish. Moreover, the analysis of talkbacks is compatible with more recent approaches to media studies, emphasizing not only the text, but also its mediation and interpretation by readers (Hall 1999 [1980]). Some even see talkbacks as an opportunity to develop a true public sphere, one which is open for those who were previously blocked by institutional gatekeepers from the intellectual elites (Hecht 2003). We look here at responses to a limited number of reports on Palestinian players’ expressions of political opinions. In each of these cases, all the talkbacks related to an article appearing in either Ynet or NRG websites were monitored.

Over all, we examined over 200 long reports, articles and interviews from the written press, television and internet websites. In addition, 367 internet surfers’ talkbacks were examined. Finally, we watched over 400 broadcast sports news magazines and about 100 full soccer matches throughout the four years of the study.
Findings

Sports and politics: never shall the two meet?

The treatment of political statements by Palestinian players follows an
unwritten rule dictating the strict separation of sports and politics. According
to this rule, sports are a clean and fair field of play, which
must be depoliticized and carefully guarded from being contaminated
by the sludge of politics. Whereas politics is often conceived as the
field of treachery, deceit, shady deals, lies and half-truths, sports are
constructed as the epitome of fair play, decency, honesty and
comradeship. This dichotomy and the contempt for established politics
are reflected in the words of publicist Daniel Ben Simon following the
success of Palestinian players in the Israeli national team: ‘Sports,
more specifically soccer, did for the Arabs in Israel what decades of
politics only ruined’ (Haaretz, 1 April 2005). Palestinian soccer players
are well aware of this demand to separate politics and sports. Over the
five years of our study, we found only a handful of cases in which
Palestinian players clearly expressed political views or talked about
issues that pertained to discriminatory politics, the relationships
between Jews and Arabs in Israel and the Israeli-Arab conflict.
Reporters, hoping to produce sensational paper-selling headlines,
often ask about these issues, but the players make noticeable efforts
to dodge such attempts to ‘drag them into talking politics’.

One common question pertains to the willingness (real or hypothe-
tical) of the Palestinian players to sing the Israeli anthem, Hatikva,
which is highly charged with the emotions and aspirations of the
Jewish people and has no relevance for other citizens. The discomfort
of the players when such questions arise is evident. They usually
attempt to evade the issue, with claims such as, by player Salah
Hasarma, ‘I don’t know the words of the anthem’ (Yediot Ahronot,
6 October 2002) or, by former player Rifat Turk, ‘I am not a singer’
(Zman Tel Aviv, 29 August 2002). In other cases they simply refuse to
answer the question, ‘to avoid complications’ (e.g. player Walid Bdeir
in an interview to Channel 2 on 15 April 2003). Such responses
indicate that the Palestinian players have learned that refusal to sing
the anthem or questioning its exclusively Jewish nature are likely to
invoke severe criticism from the Jewish public.

The one exception to the no-politics rule is what one may call
‘coexistence talk’. Positive statements that praise Arab-Jewish coex-
istence and talk about the contribution of sports to this coexistence are
gladly cited and highly commended by Jewish media and public
figures. Publicists and journalists see them as a show of good will and
use them to ‘prove’ the claim that coexistence actually depends first
and foremost on the willingness of the Arab minority to blend in.
Thus, for example, publicist Moshe Elad, a reserve army colonel studying Palestinian society, commended the willingness of Arab soccer player Abbas Suan to sing the national anthem. Elad wrote on NRG that this is ‘a true message for every Israeli Jew . . . a significant change in the tolerance level of a proud Arab citizen . . . toward the Jewish public, and perhaps also the other way around’ (NRG, 10 April 2005). Later on in the same op-ed Elad stressed the difference between the players and the Israeli Arab politicians: ‘The mature messages expressed by the representative Arab soccer players prove once again that the opinions of parliament members . . . do not necessarily represent the Arab public.’

In Elad’s view, Arab parliament members in Israel do not represent the true voice of the Arab public. This is a popular view among Israeli Jews, who often argue that Arab politicians’ ‘extreme’ statements neither represent nor help the Arab public. Soccer players, it may seem, have the potential to distinguish themselves from the politicians and bring the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ voice of the Arab public, a voice of reason, peace and compliance with the demands of the Jewish majority.

‘Play Soccer and keep quiet’: policing and silencing practices

What happens when the no-politics rule is breached and Palestinian players dare talk about sensitive political issues and criticize Israeli policies towards the Arab minority? To be sure, these are rare occasions, and the responses they arouse may explain why. When such a thing occurs, sports managers, journalists and fans line up to denounce the ‘deviant’ player and demand that he apologize and admit his ‘mistake’. They reproach him for stirring up strife and demand that he renounce his ‘divisive statements’ and express his ‘loyalty’ to Israel. Below we bring three cases that illustrate this pattern of policing Palestinian players and silencing their political speech.

Azmi Nassar

The first case is that of the late Azmi Nassar, a past soccer player who was the best-known Israeli-Palestinian soccer coach. In 2003, when his Arab team, Maccabi Akha Nazareth, climbed into the premier soccer league, Nassar gave an exuberant speech that followed the coexistence rhetoric:

Today I showed the politicians who speak about peace what real peace is. I beat them all; even [Ariel] Sharon and [Yasser] Arafat [then leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Authority]. Look at the
love around you – Arabs, Jews, Druze, Muslims, and Christians. ... This is how it should be. (Ynet, 24 May 2003)

In spite of their pacifying and convivial spirit, Nassar’s innocent words created a stir because they were interpreted as implying that both leaders carried the same responsibility for the prolonged conflict. Danny Noyman’s soccer commentary on radio illustrates this response: ‘What are these talks? Nassar should have said: “We are all with Sharon; we are all against Arafat”’ (Reshet Bet, 5 May 2003).

A week later the daily Maariv carried a long interview with Nassar, in which he reiterated his belief in coexistence. Commending Arab and Jewish harmony he talked about his Jewish wife and his son who has a Hebrew name. Later in the interview Nassar talked about his dream to coach both the soccer club Beitar Jerusalem and the Israeli national team. Once again, Nassar’s pacifying statement was met with suspicion rather than with approval. The reporter, Poriya Gal, felt the need to clarify that ‘Nassar is well aware that [his wish] is a provocation’ (Maariv, May 2003). Beitar Jerusalem is infamous for its right-wing and racist fans, and the appointment of an Arab to coach the national team is unlikely. But, rather than commending Nassar’s optimism, the interviewer perceived Nassar’s vision as a provocation and thus delineated the narrow limits of the freedom allowed to Palestinian speakers.

Najwan Ghrayib
A second case illustrating the policing of the speech of Israeli-Palestinian athletes is that of Najwan Ghrayib. Ghrayib, who played with distinction for the Israeli national team, gave an interview in January 2003 to Haifa’s local newspaper, Kolbo. Talking at the height of the second Intifada, he breached the conventional norms and talked about politics explicitly:

[Ariel Sharon, then Israeli Prime Minister] is responsible for the death of many people in the Sabra and Shatila massacre. ... He comes from a party that hates Arabs. He is not better than Saddam Hussein. Look what he’s doing in the occupied territories. ... Israeli Arabs can only advance up to a certain point. This is the result of racism. After two years in the national team, in which I excelled, a newspaper article demanded to throw me out [for not singing the national anthem] ... and they did. ... I am Palestinian and this cannot be erased. I dream to score a goal for the Palestinian national team. (Ynet, 23 January 2003)

Although rarely expressed so unswervingly by Arab sports figures, such views are widely accepted among the Arab public (Rouhana 1997;
Rouhana and Ghanem 1998; Suleiman 2002) and even among some Israeli Jews. These realities notwithstanding, Ghrayib’s words raised a commotion. Parts of the interview were published on the internet website Ynet on 23 January 2003, yielding a flood of angry responses, 316 within three days. The vast majority of these talkbacks harshly criticized Ghrayib, taking one of three major forms. First, many talkbackers denied that Arabs in Israel are being discriminated against: ‘As someone who got an opportunity equal to that of a Jew, Ghrayib should be ashamed of himself. Despite what he says, Arabs here do well. There are a lot of doctors, lawyers and engineers. Ghrayib is just a soccer player.’

Second, many other talkbackers used invective directed at the player and the whole Arab public: ‘a primitive racist’; ‘a miserable good-for-nothing’; ‘an insignificant person’; ‘murderers’. Others chose to focus on the question of Israeli Arabs’ loyalty to the state and their belonging to the Israeli collective: ‘If someone like Ghrayib, who played for the national team and got an equal opportunity ... talks like this, he should be deported.’

A third type of response derided the political pursuit of soccer players. One of them suggested: ‘Mr. Ghrayib, too bad you are wasting your talent on politics, which in any case won’t do you any good. It’s clear that to handle the ball one doesn’t need high intelligence.’ Another talkbacker wrote: ‘Your brains are in your shoes, so keep talking with your legs. This is less harmful.’

The views found among talkbackers were voiced by media people as well. Following the interview, a panel of senior coaches, ex-players and soccer commentators discussed it in a weekly TV magazine (Channel 1, 25 January 2003). They all noted that the player’s citations were ‘severe’ and ‘perturbing’. Commentator Shlomo Scharf, former coach of the Israeli national team, claimed that ‘these are grave expressions, and Ghrayib must be severely punished for uttering them’. Past goal-keeper, Bonnie Ginzburg, who led the discussion, asked the participants: ‘Should Ghrayib be allowed to play for the national team?’ Much like the internet surfers, the participants in the televised discussion did not see a need to explain what was so ‘perturbing’ in what Ghrayib had said and assumed that the gravity of the words was self-evident. Athletes, it seems, are allowed to express only mainstream hegemonic positions. There was only one exception to this view, Haaretz reporter Ronen Zaritzky, who belittled the significance of soccer players’ political statements and asked the other reporters to ‘bite their tongue and forgive, just as [Arab] players do every week’ in response to the all-too-common racist insults of sports fans (Haaretz, 26 January 2003).

The end of the Ghrayib affair reaffirmed the discursive rules limiting political expressions of Arab players. Deterred by the harsh responses,
Ghrayib issued an apology, claiming that he was ‘sorry if what he said hurt anyone or was misunderstood. … Some of it was said jokingly’ (Ynet, 30 January 2003). Skander Hadad, the Arab manager of Maccabi Akha Nazareth (Ghrayib’s club), was also fast to clarify that Ghrayib’s words did not reflect the views of his club. To make sure that the embarrassment does not recur, Hadad issued a formal notice, forbidding all the team’s players to express political opinions publicly.

**Abbas Suan**

The third case that demonstrates the work of the Hebrew media in silencing the Palestinian players is that of Abbas Suan. Like Ghrayib, Suan excelled in the Israeli premier league with his Arab team, Sakhnin, and consequently joined the Israeli national team during its 2006 World Cup campaign. Less than two months after his last-minute equalizer in the home game against the Irish national team, and just before the return match against the Irish team, Suan was quoted in Ynet: ‘God willing, we will take this opportunity. Ireland is the best team in our group. We want to go there, get through the game and, God willing, win and make the nation happy’ (Shalev 2005). This statement clearly conveys a sense of belonging to the Israeli collective and, as can be expected, was received favourably by talkbackers. Almost all of them were supportive of Suan and wished him and the national team luck.

Three months later, just before the national team played the Ukraine, Suan was interviewed by Aviad Pohoryles of NRG. This time, however, Suan, guided by the reporter’s questions, talked politics. When referring to Israel’s pending 2005 retreat from the Gaza strip he said: ‘I cannot see anything that would obstruct the retreat. No extremist, no matter how disturbed, can stop this move’ (NRG, 15 August 2005). The reporter then asked about the attempt of Eden Nathan-Zada, a right-wing extremist, to stop the retreat by conducting a terrorist attack against Israeli Arabs. On 4 August 2006 Nathan-Zada, dressed in Israel Defence Forces uniform, opened fire inside a bus in the northern town of Shfar’am (Shafamru), killing four Israeli Arab civilians and wounding twenty-two others. Nathan-Zada was restrained by other passengers, cuffed and then beaten to death by the angry crowd while still on the bus. Suan:

How can someone do this? Sit in a bus with a driver who just served you water, and then suddenly get up and kill people. He is not a man, he is an animal. Did he think he would get out alive? I do not support taking another person’s life, but what could come out of an investigation into Zada’s killing? It is very good for the state, and also for Zada, that he is dead. … His death calmed things down.
When the reporter asked Suan how he saw the future of Jerusalem, Suan again replied with surprising candour, going beyond the regular evasive replies of players when talking about contentious politics:

The major issues are Jerusalem and the right of return [for Palestinian refugees]. They’ll find a solution for the right of return, but the mosque on the Temple Mount, Al-Aqsa, should be Muslim. It would have been best if Jerusalem was a free city, open to all, but I don’t think this will work out. In the end West Jerusalem is going to be Israeli, and East Jerusalem Palestinian. This is bound to happen.

Much as in the case of Najwan Ghrayib, Suan’s opinions are typical among the Israeli Arab community (Smooha 2004). Yet, it is a voice that most Israeli Jews do not wish to hear. The interview drew fifty-one talkbacks from internet surfers, and almost all callously reproached Suan and demanded his punishment. The responses were about evenly divided between those personally attacking Suan and the Palestinians in general and those calling on Suan to keep quiet, reminding him that he is ‘just a soccer player’ who should stick to what he knows best and leave politics to those more qualified to handle such issues.

Many responses of the former type adopted a harsh language, using phrases such as ‘villain’, ‘hypocrite’, ‘dog’, ‘dirty Arab’, ‘Arab human waste’ and other creative invective. Some talkbackers made a point of reminding Suan that many more terror attacks were conducted by Palestinians than by Jews, treating Arab culture as inferior (‘Even after a hundred years among Jews, they will still remain animals’). Others went further, suggesting that Suan should be expelled from the national team or better yet leave the country (along with all the other Palestinian citizens according to some).

Responses of the second type focused on silencing Suan. Some cited the ‘no-politics rule’, reminding Suan and the website editors that sports and hard-line politics must be kept strictly separated: ‘You are an athlete [so] stay out of politics’ and ‘Hello, this is the sports section. The politics section is for this type of articles. Give us some peace and quiet’. Many others simply ordered Suan to keep his mouth shut, mostly justifying it with him being a soccer player: ‘I suggest that you shut up and focus on soccer’; ‘Stop yapping and play soccer’; ‘Why are you shoving your nose? You better stick to playing soccer.’

These responses all share a common strain. They all refuse to listen to what Suan has to say and wish to silence his voice or sanction him for what he already said. Countering this tendency is a talkbacker who
called himself ‘a sane Zionist’, one of the few surfers who supported Suan:

[Suan] is the most authentic representative of the sane Arab-Israeli public. ... Abbas – always sincere – feels the pain of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. ... He is the true Israeli sportsman in every sense – starting with his heroic goal in Ramat-Gan [Suan’s equalizer against the Irish national team] and moving to his humbleness and courage.

This uncommon perspective may teach us about the potential of Arab soccer players to penetrate into the public sphere and carry messages and opinions that the Jewish public rarely hears. These athletes, playing for Jewish clubs or for the Israeli national team, often win the support of fans, become public figures and are thus in a position to speak out and express the voice of a public that commonly remains voiceless. However, many in the Jewish public, as reflected in the internet talkbacks, refuse to listen to what Suan and his colleagues have to say or, as one of the talkbackers puts it, ‘Suan, Why can’t you just be a good Arab?’

‘If you are Palestinian, go live in Palestine’: denying hybrid identities

During the aforementioned interview with Najwan Ghrayib (Ynet, 23 January 2003) the player talked about his Palestinian identity and identification with the Palestinian tradition and land. This part of the interview stirred the highest amount of media agitation. Anthropologist Danny Rabinowitz (1993) claims that using the term ‘Palestinian’ when referring to the Arab citizens in Israel stirs uncomfortable emotions among Israeli Jews, who distinguish between Palestinians who live in the occupied territories – with whom Israel is engaged in a bloody conflict – and those living in Israel and having Israeli citizenship. In the official as well as in popular discourse, the latter are referred to as ‘Israeli Arabs’, as if they were an entirely different nation than Palestinians in the occupied territories and in exile.

Some scholars also argue that the Israeli and the Palestinian identities are contradictory options from which Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel must choose only one; the strengthening of one necessarily means the weakening of the other (Rekhes 1989). According to this view, when Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel speak of themselves as ‘Palestinian’ they convey their wish to annihilate Israel as a Jewish state. Furthermore, according to Rabinowitz, the term
‘Palestinians’ reminds Jews of the Palestinian past of Israel before the 1948 war and thus threatens the perception of the country as belonging solely to Jews (see also Yiftachel 1999).

Many of the talkbacks on Ynet following Ghrayib’s interview reflected these apprehensions. The talkbackers doubted the loyalty of Ghrayib and other Palestinian players to the Israeli state. Some even expressed their fear that the players, ‘just like every other Palestinian citizen’, are only waiting for the right time to join actively in the violent struggle of their brothers in the occupied territories. Many of the talkbackers claimed that someone who sees himself as a Palestinian should not be allowed to live in Israel. They suggested that Ghrayib should move (or be moved) to the occupied territories (‘If you are Palestinian, go live in Palestine’).

This negation of Palestinian identity is not unique to talkbackers; in fact, it is very common in Israeli media in general. Following the daily media coverage of the players reveals that their Arab/Palestinian affiliation is mostly left out. In the few instances in which it is mentioned it is mostly associated with terrorist attacks by Palestinians inside Israel. For example, in an interview with Salem Abu Siam, who played for Maccabi Tel Aviv, the reporter, Maor Zcharya, asked: ‘How do you feel in days of terror attacks? Are you upset?’ (Zman Tel Aviv, 10 July 2002). Abu Siam answered that ‘during these days no one talks politics’. Similarly, in a documentary on the European games of Maccabi Haifa, broadcast on Channel 2, Palestinian identity was tied to terror attacks. The documentary followed the success of the team in the European arena during the last few months of 2002. It went back and forth between the games and the many terror attacks that tormented Israel during the same period. Following each attack, the creators of the documentary turned to Walid Bdeir, Haifa’s Israeli-Palestinian player, to collect his response to the event. Bdeir preferred not to respond.

Questions of this sort, when directed exclusively to Palestinian players, put them in an impossible defensive position, because they associate the Arab players with those acts, as if asking the players to take some responsibility for them. The media demand that the players keep reproving the attacks conducted by the Palestinians in the occupied territories. In doing so they are expected by the journalists to draw a strict line between themselves, ‘the Israeli Arabs’ and the Palestinians in the occupied territories, but also between them and Palestinian identity, associated only with violence and terror attacks. The rules of the game seem to be set: the reporters ask questions which are bound to make the players feel uncomfortable, and the players prefer not to answer these questions, realizing that any response they give would inevitably play along with the discourse that ties Palestinian
identity to terrorism. Their attempts to bypass this trap are nevertheless often interpreted as condoning Palestinian terrorism.

**Conclusion**

While some sociology of sport scholars believe that sport stars may serve both as role models and as the genuine representatives of their underprivileged public, others hold that the field of sport reflects the tendencies of the larger society and helps to maintain the social dominance of the hegemonic groups. In this paper we examined these opposing assumptions by following the way Israeli media treat political statements by Palestinian athletes. Our findings demonstrate that, at least in the media field, the latter view is supported. Israeli media discourse is by and large intolerant towards views that challenge its nationalistic fundamentals. The same discursive rules are evident in the way both the sport media and fans respond to opinions expressed by Arab soccer players. While the talkbackers’ responses tend to be more aggressive and vicious than those of journalists and commentators, the spirit of the two groups studied is similar: both rebuff Palestinian players’ political statements and refuse to sympathize or engage with them in a serious dialogue.

When the Palestinian players dare to make critical statements, a very common response is to draw a strict dividing line between ‘clean’ sports and ‘dirty’ politics, claiming that the former must remain clearly separated from the latter. Sports commentators and internet surfers call on the Arab athletes to leave politics to the politicians and avoid ‘sticking their noses’ into something they know nothing about. Thus, when the players express their dissatisfaction with the way Palestinian citizens are treated by the state or by their Jewish fellow citizens, or when they convey empathy with their brethren under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and the Gaza strip, their statements, moderate and careful as they are, meet with outrage. The public discourse puts them back ‘in their place’ and reminds them that they are neither qualified nor have the moral authority to represent the Arab public.

Yet, this supposedly strict divide between sports and politics is much less impermeable than one would guess based on the harsh censure that Arab players receive for mingling politics and sports. First, statements in which the Arab players speak favourably about Israel and their positive experiences in it – statements that sustain the self-righteous belief that Israel is the progressive liberal democracy it claims to be – are commended and celebrated. Second, Jewish players who talk about their political views are treated differently from the Palestinians. Even when they express racist views, their declarations receive much less condemnation from reporters or from internet surfers. Such statements may still meet condescending responses,
reminding them that ‘their brains are in their shoes’. However, they are usually condoned as immature and do not rouse the same uproar as those of the Palestinian players.

Third, while the Arab players cannot cash in on their success, Jewish journalists and publicists do cash in on the success of Arab players and teams. This success, as well as the very participation of Arab athletes and teams in Israeli sports, is exploited to boost a desirable political image of Israel as an egalitarian society. Journalist Jojo Abutbul, for example, following the success of Abnaa Sakhnin, wrote that Sakhnin’s players ‘proved that if one really wanted, one could make it without having to hide behind claims of being a deprived minority’ (Yeidot Ahronot, 20 May 2004). Soccer commentator and ex-national-team coach Shlomo Sherf wrote in Yediot Ahronot: ‘When other nations scold us for our behaviour and question our right to live here, Sakhnin displays the coexistence between us and the Arab minority in Israel’ (Yediot Ahronot, 19 April 2004). Even the Minister of Education at that time, Limor Livnat, claimed that ‘the fact that an Arab team won the State Cup testifies on the maturity of Israeli society’ (Yediot Ahronot, 19 April 2004). Thus, while the Palestinians are not allowed to mix sport and politics and complain about discrimination, Jewish speakers do mix the two spheres in order to ‘prove’ that discrimination does not exist.

Finally, ignoring the sports-politics divide they have created in their responses to the political assertions of Arab players, sports journalists provoke Palestinian players to talk politics and keep reminding them of their otherness. Thus, they are often required to comment on their feelings in the wake of a terrorist attack committed by Palestinians from the occupied territories as if they were somehow responsible for those attacks. Anticipating their difficulty in singing ‘the soul of a Jew yearns . . . to be a free people in our land’ (part of Hatikva, the Israeli national anthem) they are asked hypothetically whether they would sing it if and when they get to the occasion on which it is ceremonially sung (in games of the national team or before the cup final). Any attempt to shirk such questions or any hint that a Palestinian player avoids identifying with national (Jewish) symbols is eagerly seized by sensation-seeking journalists as evidence of the players’ disloyalty and lack of gratitude for being given the opportunity to develop a professional career in a Jewish state.

Summarizing our findings, it is evident that the Arab-Palestinian soccer players who excel on the turf are prevented from serving as a channel to convey the voice of Palestinian citizens in Israel. When they try to fulfil such a role, they are vehemently silenced and sent back to the turf. Paradoxically, the attempts of Arab-Palestinian politicians to
carry the same voice are also futile. On top of being politicians (making them unreliable in the eyes of many), they are often described as traitors, backstabbing and promoting self-interests rather than voicing the authentic needs of the Arab public in Israel. Thus, when Israeli Palestinian demands are averred by politicians, they are pushed aside as extreme voices of politicians who are ‘out of touch’ with ‘regular’ people. When such demands come from grass-roots representatives – the athletes – the response is ‘keep sports clean from politics’ and do not talk about issues you know little about.

The potential of successful Arab-Palestinian players to serve as catalysts for Arab-Jewish appeasement and as channels to convey the voice of Palestinian citizens in Israel is not realized. While Palestinian players and coaches express their willingness to advance integration (see also Sorek 2007), the Jewish party typically rejects such gestures and demands that the Palestinians fully accept Jewish narratives and views. The Israeli case thus suggests that the integrative role of sport can be achieved only when the rival parties see the necessity of a compromise; when one powerful party believes that justice is fully on its side, the concessions made by the weaker side are ignored and reconciliation is rejected.

Notes

1. When we talk about Palestinians in this article we refer to Palestinian citizens of Israel and not to their compatriots in the West Bank and the Gaza strip. In Israeli political discourse the terms used to refer to these citizens – Arabs, Palestinians, Arab-Palestinians, etc. – are full of meaning and contentious. We use them interchangeably.
2. Two famous examples used to demonstrate this are those of the black boxer Muhammad Ali in the United States and the aboriginal sprinter Cathy Freeman in Australia.
3. In other research (Shor and Yonay 2009) we have demonstrated that functionalist views of this type also dominate Israeli media.
4. It is important to note here that the Hebrew media are not the only agents working to discipline the national and political aspirations of the Arab minority in Israel. Various state and governmental agencies (including of course the security forces), along with the legal system and the substantial economic dependency of the Arab sector on the Jewish one, all have an important role in this ongoing process.

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