

Game on!
Can Sports Make a Difference in the Israel-Palestine Conflict?

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Abstract

Israelis and Palestinians have been feuding for nearly 80 years, and neither warfare nor diplomacy has resulted in a resolution of the conflict. This paper explores whether sports can positively impact the enmity between the two peoples and contribute to peacebuilding. Specifically, through primary and secondary sources, I researched whether the attitudes of young Israeli and Arab athletes towards each other differ from those of their non-athlete peers, and whether international and grassroots sports diplomacy can have a meaningful impact on bringing about peace. I reviewed studies that have been conducted to determine the impact of the conflict on young people and the differences in attitude between those youths that participated in cultural exchange programs with the other side (including sports and education) and those that did not. I conducted interviews with seven Israeli and Arab athletes to find out what impact sports have had on their attitudes toward the other side and elicit their suggestions on how sports can be employed to contribute to peace. My conclusion is that while involvement in sports moderates hatred of the other side through increased understanding and empathy, sports cannot contribute significantly to a resolution of the conflict.

Introduction

Ever since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, fierce hostility has persisted between Israelis and Palestinians, repeatedly devolving into open warfare. The negative effects of the associated violence, death, destruction, loss and fear on the population, especially its youth, are profoundly devastating and enduring. A lot of research has been conducted on the history of this conflict and the diplomatic attempts that have been made to resolve the intractable political, cultural, and territorial grievances of each side. However, I took a slightly different approach based on my personal experiences as an athlete. I was inspired by a speech Nelson Mandela gave in 2000, in which he proclaimed:

“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination.”¹

I believe I know what he meant. Tennis has inspired me to be a better player and person, broadened my horizons, given me confidence and hope, taught me perseverance and how to deal with adversity, and led to friendships with people from all over the world and all walks of life, and it has accomplished all that while being incredibly fun and exciting. I encounter my opponents as equals on a level playing field. My teammates at the University of Virginia and friends on the tour feel the same way. I suspect most athletes understand and share that language, yet I wondered how it resonated with youth living in areas of acute conflict. In this thesis, I explore whether and how the attitudes of young Israeli and Arab athletes brought together by friendly athletic competition differ from the attitudes of their non-athlete peers towards the

¹Mukherji, Rahul. “Nelson Mandela used power of sport to unify, rebuild South Africa.” Sportanddev.org (2023): 11.1

Israel-Palestine conflict and towards each other. I examined the role that sports play in international relations and how, if at all, people's perspectives can change if they are involved in competitive sports. I posit that sports enable adversaries to look beyond their differences and see each other as fellow human beings and can thereby help to bring two opposing sides together in peace, even in the intractable Israel-Palestine conflict.

Literature Review

As part of this review, I first researched the major issues of contention between Israeli and Arab youths, while also looking at the mental and physical impact the wars have had on them. I then delved into the attitudes of Israeli and Arab youth towards the conflict. Thirdly, I showcased deliberate attempts that have already been made to change youth attitudes through organizations such as Seeds of Peace (SOP), while also tying in how governments have used sports diplomacy as a powerful tool to promote national cohesion. Lastly, I talked about how sports can indirectly promote understanding and bring people together, and how the Olympic ideal of friendly competition and peace demonstrates that sports do encourage athletes to seek peace and understanding of other cultures. During this research, I paid close attention to what methods are being used, such as interviews and surveys, to convey the information.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been ongoing since the state of Israel was formed in 1948, representing one of the longest intractable conflicts on earth. In fact, Israel is the only nation in the world that has never had a "conflict-free" year. Moreover, Palestinians have one of the largest refugee populations in the world. As such, both nations have struggled with conflict for decades, which has had a devastating impact on the younger generation. Laura Miller-Graff and Mark Cummings have drawn on and analyzed a number of published psychological research

articles to study the impact on youth, and to inform and direct future research efforts on this topic. They found that children's chronic exposure to war and mass trauma have caused a variety of negative consequences. These include fear of persecution and loss, lack of access to basic needs, physical health problems, developmental maladjustment, and long-term mental health problems. Research on youth and political violence shows that, of all the negative side-effects of constantly being exposed to violence at a young age, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is by far the most widely documented outcome.² Eric Dubow confirmed this through his approach of interviewing 600 Palestinian and 901 Israeli children and their parents once a year for three years in a row. The exposure to different types of conflict and violence included ethno-political, school, community, and family conflict and violence. Interesting to note here is that once violence arises somewhere, through political violence for example, violence starts appearing in other areas. In other words, cumulative exposure to violence leads to more violence in additional contexts, which then in turn leads to an increase in PTSD symptoms.³

While violence clearly affects mental health in a negative way, it has an even bigger impact on the actions and beliefs of youth towards others. How exposure to violence affects youth's perspectives and belief systems is a critical consideration because early exposure to violence is linked to increased aggressive behaviors. According to Miller-Graff's and Cummings' research, cognitive effects of violence play a substantial role in intergenerational cycles of violence that are sustained through stereotyping, restricted cognitive flexibility, and negative beliefs about the "other." Strong stereotyping about the "other" by youth is often developed in conflict settings. When stereotypes take on a negative connotation, it can lead to a reduction in

²Miller-Graff, Laura E., and E. Mark Cummings. "The Israeli-Palestinian conflict: Effects on youth adjustment, available interventions, and future research directions." *Developmental Review* 43 (2017): 1-47.

³Dubow, Eric F., et al. "Cumulative effects of exposure to violence on posttraumatic stress in Palestinian and Israeli youth." *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology* 41.6 (2012): 837-844.

people advocating for peace and to a justification of aggressive or violent behavior. Cognitive flexibility, which is the ability to shift perspectives, is also reduced by being exposed to higher levels of violence, which then in turn affects both youth's mental health and positive intergroup relations. The high exposure to political violence in Israel and Palestine has unsurprisingly led to a greater rejection of peace efforts among Israeli and Palestinian civilians. Recent data suggests that in Israel and Palestine, negative and dehumanizing beliefs about "outgroups" have grown across middle childhood and adolescence.⁴

Drawing on Miller-Graff's, Cummings', and Eric Dubow's own findings on the higher levels of PTSD found in children who are repeatedly exposed to violence, Dubow then goes on to examine the extent to which Israeli and Palestinian youths in turn become more aggressive and antisocial. He examines this by collecting four waves of data from 162 Israeli and 400 Palestinian youths between the ages of eight and fourteen. The first three waves were consecutive annual assessments, whereas the fourth wave was conducted four years after the third wave. This means that by the time he conducted the fourth wave, the kids were in their early teens to early twenties. By using social-cognitive ecological models of the development of aggression, and models of the development of beliefs about the "other," he was able to see whether those attitudes had changed over the four years and by how much. The results found that both early cumulative exposure to ethnic-political violence during childhood and exposure to violence in early adulthood resulted in greater violent and antisocial behavior later on. Not only does ethnic-political violence lead to increased aggression in an individual, therefore towards one's own ethnic group (in-group), but also towards the "other" (out-group). That is what

⁴Miller-Graff, Laura E., and E. Mark Cummings. "The Israeli–Palestinian conflict: Effects on youth adjustment, available interventions, and future research directions." *Developmental Review* 43 (2017): 1-47.

eventually leads to conflict because members of society who are impacted by political conflict develop negative thoughts about the enemy or the out-group, including support for war.⁵

Another important factor leading to an increase in violence is youth unemployment. In a study by Raul Caruso and Evelina Gavrilova, they found that the growth rate of youth unemployment and Palestinian youth brutality have a positive association. There was also a positive correlation between the number of violent incidents and the growth rate of youth unemployment. This leads to the conclusion that a decrease in economic opportunities for youth leads to an increase in brutality, terrorism, and politically motivated violence in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Grievance, which is caused by many factors in war, including the deprivation of economic opportunities for the younger generation, often takes a destructive shape.⁶

With all the negative side-effects of growing up in a war-torn country with constant conflict and violence, it comes as no surprise that a majority of the youth in each of the Israeli and Palestinian populations experiences so much hatred towards the “other.” Their violent behaviors towards one another are not something they are born with, but are a natural outcome of being a victim of violence and exposure to stereotyping that gets instilled in their minds from a young age. Dubow states that among the most powerful learning mechanisms for the evolving person is observational learning. Countless studies have shown that children’s observations of violence, whether occurring in families, peer groups, neighborhoods, or the media, are related to

⁵Dubow, Eric F., et al. "Serious violent behavior and antisocial outcomes as consequences of exposure to ethnic-political conflict and violence among Israeli and Palestinian youth." *Aggressive behavior* 45.3 (2019): 287-299.

⁶Caruso, Raul, and Evelina Gavrilova. "Youth unemployment, terrorism and political violence, evidence from the Israeli/Palestinian conflict." *Peace economics, peace science and public policy* 18.2 (2012).

the development of aggressive behaviors.⁷ It is those factors that answer the question why young Israeli and Palestinians think the way they do.

This section analyzes the actual beliefs and attitudes of young Israelis and Palestinians towards the conflict. Meytal Nasie's and Daniel Bar-Tal's study of the conflict through the eyes of Palestinian children and adolescents made several discoveries. One of their main findings was that of hope. However, the response was not exactly the one they were expecting with respect to hope. Hope, in the eyes of these Palestinian adolescents, is a longing for freedom, victory, liberation from the occupation, return of refugees to their homeland, emancipation of Jerusalem, avenging the blood of martyrs, and yearning for a brighter future. Hope for them does not necessarily mean longing for peace. In fact, there was no manifestation of hope for peace between the two sides of the conflict. This indicates that the Palestinian youth does not see peace as a means to reach their goals. Even though the Palestinian youth in the sample had endured harsh experiences in the conflict, they were characterized by high levels of activism, high risk-taking, and their willingness to carry their struggle on forever.⁸

According to Shifra Sagy, Avi Kaplan, and Sami Adwan and their research study concerning the expectations for the future among Israeli and Palestinian youth, Israelis expressed more trust in the possibility of achieving peace in the future. While both sides are pessimistic about the possibility of peace, Palestinian adolescents scored higher on the item "the conflict will not be resolved at all" compared to their Israeli counterparts. The different understanding of peace between the two groups plays a role in their answer. Israelis see peace as a situation in which there is no conflict or violence, and the Palestinians understand peace as a situation where

⁷Dubow, Eric F., et al. "Serious violent behavior and antisocial outcomes as consequences of exposure to ethnic-political conflict and violence among Israeli and Palestinian youth." *Aggressive behavior* 45.3 (2019): 287-299.

⁸Nasie, M., & Bar-Tal, D. (2012). Sociopsychological infrastructure of an intractable conflict through the eyes of Palestinian children and adolescents. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 18(1), 3–20.

there is political independence, freedom, and justice, and where they would be able to establish their own independent state. Israelis also had a brighter view on the future, whereas Palestinians expected that their future would bring only modest economic and social improvements, and even less peace than in the past. Nonetheless, despite the two groups' differences, Sagy, Kaplan, and Adwan had a fairly optimistic view on what can be done to make coexistence between the two groups of people possible, which includes the mutual recognition of the historical narrative on each side. They believe that mutual recognition of the legitimacy of the other side's perspective, and the ability to understand and acknowledge each other's pain, are essential to achieving a common dialogue between the two peoples. Even though there is an asymmetry in the power relationship, a deeper recognition of the other's narrative in the educational system of both nations is necessary.⁹

Yifat Biton and Gavriel Salomon did exactly that. They wanted to see whether active participation in a well-designed peace education program changed the views of Israeli and Palestinian youths on the conflict. They wanted to test Dubow's statement that "violence can not only be learned, but also unlearned."¹⁰ The two studied the extent to which the collective narrative of a group in conflict and participation in a peace education program affects youth's perceptions of peace. They took a sample size of 565 Palestinian and Israeli adolescents, half of whom were enrolled in a year-long school-based program, while the other half without such a program served as the control group. Pre-and post-program questionnaires were then handed out to see whether the results had changed over the course of a year. Pre-program, Israeli students emphasized peace as the absence of violence, whereas the Palestinian students stressed its

⁹Sagy, Shifra, Avi Kaplan, and Sami Adwan. "Interpretations of the past and expectations for the future among Israeli and Palestinian youth." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 72.1 (2002): 26-38.

¹⁰Dubow, Eric F., et al. "Serious violent behavior and antisocial outcomes as consequences of exposure to ethnic-political conflict and violence among Israeli and Palestinian youth." *Aggressive behavior* 45.3 (2019): 287-299.

structural aspects, which are independence and equality. Post-program, both the Israeli and Palestinian students that participated in the program highlighted the positive aspects of peace, such as cooperation and harmony. The control groups, on the other hand, increasingly suggested war as a means to attain peace. While the Palestinian control group also showed greater hatred towards Jews, there was no such increase among program participants. This peace education program familiarized each side with the perspectives of the other, thereby changing their view of the conflict to a less monolithic ('we are right, and you are wrong') and more nuanced one. The outcome was that program participants perceived peace in a more constructive way. It also demonstrates that individuals' perceptions of peace are shaped by their group's collective narrative and by current events, but are significantly changed by the participation in a peace education program. It is interesting to note, however, that although the peace education program seemed to have humanized each side in the eyes of their adversaries, it did not change their mind about the truth of their position.¹¹ Finding a program that legitimizes the opposing narratives in the eyes of Palestinians and Israelis would be a potential game changer, as it could lead to more peace and harmony between the two nations.

Seeds of Peace (SOP) is another such peace education program. It seeks to bring Arab and Israeli youth together at a summer camp in the United States to launch them on the process of creating peace between their peoples. The teenagers should be old enough to comprehend the Arab-Israeli conflict, but young enough to be open to new ideas about the situation. During the three-and-a-half weeks of summer camp, the groups live, eat, work, and play side by side while learning about solutions to the conflict. The main reason why SOP has worked is because it is based on the premise that real peace is made between peoples and not between governments.

¹¹Biton, Y., & Salomon, G. (2006). Peace in the Eyes of Israeli and Palestinian Youths: Effects of Collective Narratives and Peace Education Program. *Journal of Peace Research*, 43(2), 167-180.

While politicians and leaders can sign peace treaties or engage in negotiations, it is eventually up to ordinary citizens whether or not peace will endure. A key factor in this process is the humanization of the “other,” therefore getting rid of the stereotypes that these children are raised with. At the SOP camp, the Arab and Israeli teenagers are encouraged to think and act as individuals, and they are told to represent only themselves in the conflict resolution sessions and life. This approach allows the participants to feel comfortable sharing their own opinions, and not to represent a national or religious entity.¹² The goal of SOP is that once the camp is over, the individuals return home with a different understanding and perception of the conflict. It is to show the youth that their “enemies” are also only human beings, just like they are. The hope is that with the experience of the SOP program, these individuals can drive positive change back home.

In Ned Lazarus’ evaluation of the Seeds of Peace (SOP) programs, he found that hundreds of SOP graduates remained involved in peacebuilding activities in the Middle East during significant periods of their lives. He emphasized that especially in moments of escalation in the conflict, the SOP alumni were able to engage in efforts for meaningful social change.¹³ This shows that not only does SOP bring youth together from areas of conflict in the Middle East, but it also provides them with the knowledge and an understanding of how they can have a positive impact on the conflict once the participants return home. There are, however, also critiques of SOP. Some see it as corrupt, ineffective, and disruptive. These critics think that it is impotent, meaning that the impact of individual SOP interventions is short and quickly erased. Others believe that SOP participants exploit funders in order to obtain personal benefits and

¹²Shapiro, Adam. "Planting Seeds of Peace with Arab and Israeli Youth." *Waiting for the Change* (1999).

¹³Lazarus, Ned. *Evaluating peace education in the Oslo-Intifada generation: A long-term impact study of Seeds of Peace 1993–2010*. American University, 2011.

travel abroad. Lastly, SOP participants that return to the Middle East are often accused of having been brainwashed to accept the humanity and legitimacy of the enemy, therefore forgetting their own history and identity.¹² Despite some of this backlash, many authors have spoken in favor of SOP. Karen Ross and Ned Lazarus in their “Tracing the Long-Term Impacts of a Generation of Israeli-Palestinian Youth Encounters” found that one in five alumni are active in peacebuilding and social change efforts as adults, many years after initial participation in encounters.¹⁴ Furthermore, individual benefits gained through programs such as SOP have proven to be essential, since it helps participants expand their social circles, makes them feel less stress and anxiety in conflict situations, reduces their prejudices, and makes it easier to approach social issues such as promoting justice amid groups in conflict.¹⁵

As is evident in the previous paragraphs, there have been peace education programs such as Seeds of Peace (SOP) that aim to bring together people of different cultures in order for them to then create peace between their peoples. I want to study what kind of role sports plays in the context of conflict and peace and whether there have been programs of friendly competition that aim to have a similar impact as the SOP program. One such event is the Olympics, which sets the basis for sports and its purpose. In Nasim Salehi’s “The Ideals of the Olympic Movement,” he reviews and sheds light on what the Olympics aim to represent. Building on the ancient Greek Olympic Games, the modern Olympic Games are held with the purpose of spreading peace, friendship, health, respect and international understanding, and as a means to create an ideal human society. Pierre de Coubertin, who is known as the father of the modern Olympics, said that “participation of youth in sports events results in the appearance of a movement, a

¹⁴Ross, Karen, and Ned Lazarus. "Tracing the long-term impacts of a generation of Israeli-Palestinian youth encounters." *IJCER* 3 (2015): 116.

¹⁵White, S., Schroeder, J., & Risen, J. L. (2021). When “enemies” become close: Relationship formation among Palestinians and Jewish Israelis at a youth camp. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 121(1), 76–94.

movement which can terminate international quarrels in a benign way and also spread messages of peace, friendship, and understanding between the nations.” The Olympics were meant to represent not only a sporting event, but also a movement to unlock growth and evolution for people, and to change the world into a healthy place. Interestingly, Coubertin proposed to hold the modern Olympic Games as a solution to end deep political and social crises in France. Coubertin believed that sport, by bringing together young athletes from all over the world, no matter their religion, cultural beliefs, or ethnicity, would solve many of the social and political conflicts in the world. The modern Olympic Games were meant to educate youth by means of sport in order to raise understanding and empathy among them and their competitors and friends, and also to contribute to making a more peaceful and better world. One of the main points about the Olympics is that through international sport, international friendships were formed. In other words, citizens of the world were meant to understand each other better through games rather than resorting to force to resolve their differences.¹⁶

It is important to acknowledge that although the Olympics were founded on the idea that sports can transcend politics, sadly the Olympics have often been used to make political statements. For example, in the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, Palestinian terrorists took Israeli athletes hostage (two of the Israeli athletes died). In 1980, the Western countries, led by the United States boycotted the Olympic Games held in Moscow, due to the Soviet Union having invaded Afghanistan the year before. In 1984, the Eastern Bloc countries, led by the Soviet Union, boycotted the Los Angeles Olympic Games, as a retribution to the West for the West’s boycott of the Moscow Games.

¹⁶Salehi, Nasim. "THE IDEALS OF THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT." 102-106.

Aside from the Olympics and its positive ideals, there have been deliberate actions taken to put those ideals into practice through friendly competition in exchange programs. One such program is the International Sports Programming Initiative (ISPI), which uses sports to promote tolerance and respect for diversity among youths around the world. ISPI has taken place in Jordan, Tajikistan, and the United States, and it used soccer to promote grassroots diplomacy. The program focused on leadership, tolerance, diversity, and citizenship. It also included training the coaches of the soccer teams to design sport for development and peace programs in their local communities, while learning more about other cultures and building close relationships in the process. Rather than focus on advancing official governmental objectives, this program aimed to build trust and mutual understanding among the different players and coaches from Jordan, Tajikistan, and the United States through their shared interest in soccer. By visiting the home countries of the other teams, individuals were able to draw conclusions more organically than through media or political blasts of information. It helped participants gain a deeper understanding of the local culture and be reminded of the similarities, and not just the differences, between peoples.¹⁷ Another such program, called Sport for Social Change (SSC), took place with youth in India, Tajikistan, and Jordan. Its goal was also to increase conflict prevention and resolution skills through sporting activities. SSC emphasizes that sport brings people together and disarms individuals that might conflict with one another.¹⁸ Both programs are grassroots programs, meaning that they use people in a given region or community as the basis for a political or economic movement.

¹⁷Blom, Lindsey C., Paz A. Magat, and Heather L. Dichter. "Grassroots diplomacy through coach education: Americans, Jordanians and Tajiks." *Soccer & Society* 21.5 (2020): 535-550.

¹⁸Gerstein, L. H., Blom, L. C., Banerjee, A., Farello, A., & Crabb, L. (2021). Sport for social change: An action-oriented peace education curriculum. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 27(2), 160–169.

Governments have also often turned to sports as an efficient soft power tool, which Stella Wasike writes about in her “Politics of Grassroots Sports Diplomacy in National Cohesion.” Governments use sports diplomacy as a soft power tool because it is an integral element of national identity, and it brings people together. Sports diplomacy’s values incorporate competition, teamwork, and fair play. These are all valuable traits that can be used to inform, engage, and influence people, especially youth. While these are all reasonable and effective approaches for a government, sports diplomacy is associated mainly with mega-sport events, elite sports, and professional athletes. This neglects sports at the grassroots level, where the organizations and people are considered less relevant for the government. Grassroots sports is known as sports for all, and it refers to non-professional sports activities. They are the sports that exist in people’s daily lives, and because they are accessible to anyone, they attract high rates of participation. They have the capability to strengthen people-to-people relations, which then leads to national cohesion. Aside from social integration and inclusion, grassroots sports unite people in challenging times such as conflict, and it should therefore be considered as a tool to be used by policymakers to achieve cohesion around the world. Diplomatic actions should focus not only on events that are in the limelight, such as the Olympics, but also the grassroots sports events, which include people-to-people dialogues, cross-border exchanges that happen in mass participation sports, and which are not projected in the media. Grassroots sports do not select based on gender, age, physical ability, or ethnic background, but are open to everyone.¹⁹ Promoting grassroots sports and shifting more attention to that opportunity will increase the likelihood of peace, understanding, and a united world.

¹⁹Wasike, Stella. "Politics of Grassroot Sports Diplomacy in National Cohesion."

Personal Contribution

For my personal contribution, I conducted seven interviews with Israeli and Arab athletes to learn their views on the conflict in the Middle East. After researching the attitudes of non-athletes toward the conflict, I was able to determine whether and how the opinions of athletes differ from those of non-athletes. Reading about the Olympic ideal and how sports can expose a participant to different people from all over the world, and drawing on my own experiences as an athlete, I was confident that the opinions of athletes would be different from and more understanding of the “other” than those of non-athletes. As set forth in my findings, cultural beliefs, ethnicity, and race are largely set aside during the heat of competition. Sports force people to interact with one another, teaching individuals that the “other” is not that different after all. The Sports for Social Change program put it well, saying that sports disarm individuals that might otherwise be in conflict with one another.²⁰ In competition, the only elements that do the talking are the tennis ball, the sound of a shoe rubbing against the concrete floor, and the mutual love for the game. While I embarked upon my personal contribution to this thesis with the idea that sports can transcend politics and also that sports can help adversaries to overcome their differences and potentially help to bring two opposing sides together in peace, I was committed to approaching each interview with an open mind and determined not to let my personal hope get in the way of the interviewees’ honest answers. The results gathered through the interviews speak for themselves and are presented in the following paragraphs.

²⁰Gerstein, L. H., Blom, L. C., Banerjee, A., Farello, A., & Crabb, L. (2021). Sport for social change: An action-oriented peace education curriculum. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 27(2), 160–169.

Methods

My method consisted of conducting individual in-depth interviews with Israeli, Palestinian, and other Arab athletes. In total, I interviewed four Israeli tennis players, two Egyptian squash players and an Olympic runner from Jordan, who is Palestinian-Jordanian. I had lined up ten interviews, six with Israelis and four with Arabs, but one Israeli canceled because he is actively fighting in the military with hardly a moment of free time, another Israeli did not want to be involved despite my assurances of anonymity, and one Egyptian was simply too busy after having added tournaments to an already heavy schedule. The athletes ranged in age from 22 to 29, and all had played at the highest level and competed internationally since a young age. With the exception of the runner, all the athletes play racquet sports, which is a direct result of my being a tennis player with a broad network in the world of tennis and, to a lesser extent, squash. There are no Palestinian tennis or squash players among the interviewees, because, as far as I know, there are none playing at a competitive level. Both sports are expensive and hence require a strong national federation, tradition and infrastructure, none of which are present in Gaza or the West Bank. I conducted the interviews in March and April 2024 and followed up with a few of the athletes in May to clarify a number of their points. Some of these athletes have lost family members and friends to the conflict; a few of them continue to live in their home countries. Several of those who agreed to be interviewed asked whether I would publish my work for fear of being exposed. Despite their concerns, all seven were eager to help and share their views. Knowing how close they are to the conflict and seeing their willingness to cooperate suggested that these candidates were going to have strong opinions on the subject and answer truthfully. I am respecting their wishes to not risk exposure by keeping their identities confidential. This gave them the peace of mind to respond honestly without holding back. The athletes whose histories

are described in greater detail did not object to being identified, but I opted to leave out all names. I made sure to proceed with caution and an open mind and to respect all of their answers.

Variables

For my interview questions, I started off by asking about their general opinions on the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The questions were meant to cover basics and to let them share their thoughts on the topic, as well as to set a benchmark against which to measure the sports-related answers. Next, I delved into more specific questions, which asked them to share the experiences they had had through their sport with respect to meeting people of different ethnicities and backgrounds. Important to note here, is that I asked each candidate the same questions. This allowed me to see when or if the answers reached a point of saturation or redundancy, meaning that I would start hearing the same responses to the questions over and over. If the answers repeated themselves, it would mean either that sports have a positive impact on peacebuilding in the countries or that there would be a negative relationship. If the answers were inconsistent, it might mean that sports have no effect on peacebuilding and acceptance of the other culture. The following questions were formulated to elicit answers that show whether sports do have an impact on conflict resolution and whether sports can change the perception of the other culture. The more in-depth and open-ended questions that leave room for further explanation allowed the candidates to add nuance and encouraged them to think hard about what ideas and measures could be put into place to improve the relationship between the two peoples.

Findings:

1. *What are your general thoughts about the ongoing conflict between Israel and Gaza?*

What are your more general thoughts about Israel? And about Palestine? Ceasefire?

Two-state solution?

Israeli athletes' point of view: The very first thing every single Israeli interviewee stated is that this war is horrible, sad, and that they wish it would end. All they want is to live peacefully, to be able to have a family, a home, and go to work without having to worry what might happen next. They all mentioned that Israel was forced to go to war because of the October 7th attacks. It showed them that there is an authority (Hamas) in control on the other side that does not want to live side by side peacefully. Hamas wants to kill every last Jew there is, no matter the age or gender. When confronted with the question of a potential ceasefire, they all said "no." They argued that while what is happening in Gaza right now is horrible and devastating, with innocent civilians, especially children, dying, Israel is nonetheless in a tough spot. To them, the conditions for a ceasefire are not acceptable. As long as Hamas is holding any Israeli citizen hostage, a ceasefire would not be the right step. On top of that, a ceasefire would give Hamas time to regroup. If Israel would agree to a ceasefire now, then it would be as if Israel did not change anything. It would mean that Israel destroyed a great portion of Gaza, but the leaders of Hamas are still alive, able to rebuild their capabilities and then strike again. Israel would have accomplished nothing. One of the athletes also mentioned that the individual who planned the attack on October 7th had been imprisoned in Israel before being released in 2011 along with 1026 other Palestinian prisoners in exchange for an Israeli hostage named Gilad Shalit, who had been held by Hamas. After October 7th, half of the Hamas prisoners incarcerated in Israel were released in the first hostage deal. They worry that the release of all remaining Hamas prisoners

will lead to another October 7th attack a few years down the road. When asked about a two-state solution, all of them answered that it would be great if it worked, but that it is unlikely to happen. They said that the main barrier is that to this day there are Arab countries which do not recognize Israel as its own independent state. Before any talk of a two-state solution is possible, Palestinians and all other Arab nations have to recognize Israel as a permanent, independent state. They mentioned that there were opportunities in the past in which a two-state solution was proposed, but that each time the Palestinians rejected it. Most of the interviewees believe that the majority of civilians in Palestine also want just to live peacefully, but that Hamas is the problem. Israel struggles because they cannot even sit at a negotiation table with Hamas, because all Hamas really wants is to get rid of Israelis entirely. So, while they all support a two-state solution, they think it is unlikely to happen, especially at the moment.

Arab athletes' point of view: When I asked the three Arab interviewees about their opinion on the ceasefire, their immediate answer was that the fighting must stop as soon as possible. While they agree that the October 7th attacks were horrible, what Israel has perpetrated is just as bad or even worse. In their eyes, Israel is clearly the oppressor and Palestinians are the oppressed. The first and obvious step in the right direction is a ceasefire, because at this point it is primarily innocent civilians, entire families and far too many children, who are being killed. While all of them agree that more action should be taken by the international community, one of the athletes, an Egyptian, emphasized specifically that a ceasefire has to be enforced by the United States or the United Nations. He believes that parameters must be put in place by an outside authority for both countries to follow because otherwise Israel will never stop. In his mind, Israel wants to eliminate Palestinians, deny them their existence, their territory, their history and even their identity. Hamas is Palestine's only hope of resisting and fighting back.

However, he agrees that the more Hamas fights back, the more Israel will counter. Another Arab athlete, a Palestinian-Jordanian runner, said that after a ceasefire happens, there needs to be some measure of equality between the two peoples. Palestinians need to be viewed under international law as people deserving of equal rights and freedoms. When I asked them the question regarding a potential two-state solution, the Egyptians were heavily in favour of it. They believe that Israel and Palestine should go back to the first and second accords, where they outline the borders for the two nations. Palestine retains the West Bank and Gaza, and Israel is its own state in all other territory it now holds. The Palestinian-Jordanian runner, on the other hand, said that realistically, she cannot imagine a world in which Israel ceases to exhibit its current expansionist ambitions. She admits her opinion may be affected by the escalation of the situation right now, but she struggles to visualize Israel and Palestine existing in a two-state solution in a power dynamic of equals. Of course that would be the goal, but as hard as she tries, right now she cannot imagine that outcome.

2. In your opinion, do sports provide a neutral ground for people of different nationalities or ethnicities to come together? If yes, how so?

This question elicited a mix of answers. While both Arab and Israeli athletes agree that sports have opened their eyes to multiple different cultures and ethnicities, and that it brings people together, they all also mentioned how political sports can be. One of the athletes mentioned that the beauty of sports is that during competition everything else around you falls away and is temporarily forgotten. At least that is what it can and should be. Unfortunately, however, in multiple instances that is not the case, such as, for example, banning Russians from competing in Wimbledon in 2022 because of the Russo-Ukrainian war. All of the Israelis also mentioned a few

instances where they were supposed to compete against an Arab player, yet he never showed up. One Israeli player described standing on the court at a futures tournament (lower-level ATP tournament) in Europe waiting to begin his match, only to have the Iranian player against whom he was to compete forfeit the match. Iran, while not an Arab country, is Muslim, hostile to Israel and supportive of Hamas. When the Israeli player asked his opponent the day after why he didn't play, the Iranian player replied, "If I go up against you, my government and tennis federation might do something to my family, or they might not let me back into the country. They're not recognizing Israel as a country. I couldn't take that risk." They had practiced together the day before, and it had been productive, friendly and fun, but he said he couldn't compete because that could cause trouble. The Israelis described multiple other instances where this happened, including, for example, in Judo and fighting sports. They know from friends in those sports that normally, before and after a fight, the two competitors shake each other's hand. However, most of the time when Israelis and Arabs fight against each other, the Arab athlete refuses to do so. All the Israeli athletes I interviewed said this. They believe that it is always the Arab athlete that refuses. They insist that Israelis would shake hands. One athlete talked about other repercussions lurking in the background. By that, he meant that if a professional athlete speaks up about a political issue on social media, that athlete could get punished for it, lose sponsorships, endorsements, and other necessary support. Another athlete argued that he strongly believes sports do create a neutral ground. He gave the example of professional soccer teams in Egypt, France, in fact all over the world. People from various countries with different ethnicities, cultures, religions and backgrounds come together to play on the same team and pursue a common goal. The same goes for the fans watching in the stands. They come together from all different walks of life to bond over their team. Most differences are set aside during competition.

The Egyptian squash player gave the example of playing on a college team with teammates from Israel, the U.S., Europe, Asia, almost every continent, and being an extremely tight group. He loves all of them as if they were family. Therefore, it appears that while, on the one hand, sports offer a forum that brings different people together and can unite them, on the other hand, one cannot ignore the extent to which politics encroach upon sports. Someone pointed out that at the Olympics and world championships, one wears uniforms with one's flags. Athletes officially and proudly represent their different countries, their cultures, and they are, albeit in an innocent way, extensions of their systems. However, sometimes those differences and divisions are evident in negative ways at professional sports contests (such as an ITF tennis tournament) which, unlike the Olympics, don't function as official international competitions, at which point they become evidence of the destructive and painful effects of conflict that cannot be erased by a shared passion for a sport.

3. *Can you share any experiences where sports helped you better understand or connect with someone [of the other nationality/ethnicity]?*

Everyone's responses to this question spoke very positively about sports. While one of the Israeli athletes mentioned his experience with a Muslim athlete who said he would not compete against the Israeli out of fear of punishment in his home country, others mentioned the extent to which they felt more connected to people from other countries because they were exposed to them. One Israeli athlete recounted that she competed and practiced with Egyptians two years in a row at a tournament. The Egyptians were companionable, and they got along well and liked training together. She thought the difference might be that Egypt and Israel have a peace agreement between the two countries. The two Egyptian athletes, who played a sport in college,

talked about how their sport and being on a team opened their eyes to other cultures. Before going to college, all they knew from growing up in Egypt was that Israel is bad. And they automatically associated that assessment with the Jewish religion. They admitted getting sucked into the stereotypes and that being harmful. However, once they arrived at college, they were exposed to people of different skin colors, religions, nationalities, and backgrounds. Besides themselves, their team included, among others, Indians, Israelis, Americans, Jews, Muslims, Christians, and atheists. Religion did not play a role on the team. They argued that the problem is that everywhere children are taught that those outside their country are in the wrong. They had been based in Egypt their whole lives, and it took coming to the United States to make them realize that there is nothing wrong with those they had categorically condemned before. There is much more to people than their nationality, religion, ethnicity, and skin color, and it is as simple as that. Competing in sports in college, becoming such a close family with people from extremely diverse backgrounds revealed this to them and convinced them of the wrong of racism, islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and just about every other “ism”. They explained that there were people at their university and on their team who are very pro-Israel and coming from Egypt, they are more pro-Palestine. They also admitted to heated arguments. And yet they explained that the teammates remained friends and that not a single Arab on the team would ever again automatically hate Jews, and not a single Jewish player would ever believe that every Muslim is a terrorist. The team fed off the diversity and learned from one another. The Palestinian-Jordanian runner shared a few great experiences through which her sport helped her connect and understand someone better. These experiences took place both in and outside of Jordan. The track community in Jordan brings together people from many different backgrounds, from upbringings that were very different from how she was raised. She believes that if she

hadn't been involved in track, she would never have been introduced to or become friends with them. She met some of her best friends through her sport, built strong friendships over time, and traveled with people from rural parts of Jordan. People have different ideas about how one should live one's life and have different aspirations in that respect. However, she and her fellow runners bonded over their love of track and field, wanting to represent Jordan the best way possible. She learned about their upbringing and what they value, what makes them tick. Hearing those stories gave her a newfound respect for why they do what they do beyond the international sports arena. She continued by saying that year after year, it's wonderful to observe the progression from youth athletes to seniors and to encounter familiar faces time and again. These familiar faces come from different countries, different languages. She has a friend from Uzbekistan who speaks no English whatsoever, and the Palestinian-Jordanian runner definitely does not speak Uzbek. My interviewee saw the Uzbek athlete for the first time in Japan in 2018 and then saw her again in Thailand this past summer. When they met again, they hugged as if they had known each other intimately forever. Sharing the experience of participating in the same sport, being in the call room together before competition, bestows an understanding, a bond, a respect, that to an extent powerfully transcends where one is from. Sports, possibly more than anything else, bring together people from so many different parts of the world and so many walks of life. For the brief span of time while one is running the race or is in the call room, it is an equalizer. But it is during all the other engagements required by sports that it becomes more complex, because being involved in sport, being an ambassador for one's country, is more than running the 50 second race or playing the two-hour tennis match.

4. *How has your participation in sports affected your attitude towards people from different nationalities or ethnicities?*

All of the athletes mentioned that their participation in sports has opened their eyes to different cultures and people from different nationalities or ethnicities. The reason for that is the travel. When one is a professional athlete, one travels to so many different places and is exposed to the different ways of life there. It showed them that wherever one grew up, it is not the only way to go about life. They also mentioned that when one sees another athlete from a different country, especially from one's sport, the one thing one usually wants to do is talk to them about their sport. One wants to learn from them and gather information on how and where they train, whom they have competed against and which tournaments they are playing, for example.

Athletes bond with each other over the shared experience and mutual love for the sport.

Specifically, regarding Israel and Palestine, another athlete mentioned that many times in regular life, they do not get the chance to meet someone from the other side. Israelis do not encounter Palestinians up close and vice versa. This physical separation is exacerbated by the fact that the only perspective one reads about in the local news is that the other side is in the wrong and that the divisions are intractable. However, in sports, one experiences exposure to the other side in a context where a fellow athlete, a human being, is the face of the other side and the arena is one in which one knows one is safe. The athletes are in that shared, safe environment just to run or play tennis, for example, so the tensions and divisions recede into the background, at least to a certain extent. Sports open the door for people to have conversations and to meet each other as athletes and human beings and to recognize commonalities, at the very least in their shared experiences surrounding their sport and their passion for it.

5. *Have you ever had to compete against or trained with (sparred with) Israeli opponents? If yes, do you feel differently about competing against them compared with opponents who have a different nationality?*

Every single Arab athlete I spoke with said that they would have extra motivation if they faced an Israeli athlete. With the conflict currently raging and the built-up anger that comes with it, competing against an Israeli would fuel the competitive fire in them. That fire is not meant to be released on anybody in a hostile way, but there is a decided difference in the combative level. Having that extra desire to win when playing against an Israeli might seem wrong; however, it is understandable and emotionally justifiable. In their minds, Israel is supporting the mass killing of the Palestinian people, whereas Israel believes that all Arab nations support the killing of their people. To Arabs, Israel is not just any foreign country they are playing against, but a country that oppresses Arabs. While they would not treat the Israeli opponent any differently than an athlete from any other country, beating an Israeli would be an even sweeter victory than a win over someone else. The Palestinian-Jordanian shared a few of her experiences being on a team in college with an Israeli. When she first heard he was coming, she was quite upset. She was a little bit taken aback by the fact that he would be joining the team. Knowing that she would be seeing this person every day, she did not know what to expect. She would be lying if she said that they have become best friends, but with time and with conversation, they developed a relationship of mutual respect. To her, the key was that he was able to acknowledge and rid himself of the cognitive dissonance by which Israel can do no wrong and there is no way he can criticize the state where he was brought up. Seeing that this person was curious about her opinion and wanted to understand it, and also openly discussed with her his qualms about his government and how he formed his opinions, allowed them to have a relationship of mutual respect. However, once back

in the context of an international competition, she does not think that the sort of friendship she has with athletes from other countries would arise with anyone from the Israeli team. She believes there are two reasons for this. Firstly, she thinks that there is almost no such thing as a complete Israeli civilian because everyone has to serve in the military. Therefore, no one can claim complete ignorance of what the Israeli army is perpetrating. In her eyes, it is a system that practically forces you to serve in the military for your country and commit atrocities against Palestinians. Her second reason is that she has been in spaces, such as the Olympics for example, where Israelis, who were competing, tormented athletes in her circle who were of Palestinian descent. This was painful for her to witness because one is supposed to be in a safe zone at the Olympics. While it is publicized to be that way, in reality, it is not. People's opinions and tendencies still pierce the veneer.

6. Have you ever had to compete against or trained with (sparred with) Palestinian/Arab opponents? If yes, do you feel differently about competing against them compared with opponents who have a different nationality?

Every single Israeli athlete I spoke with said that they would have extra motivation if they faced an Arab athlete. Interesting to note here, however, is that they almost never faced an Arab athlete. Every time they were supposed to, their opponent pulled out at the last moment because of their government or federation. Even when the Israeli and Arab athlete are friends, the Arab athlete often does not compete because they fear getting into trouble at home. The athletes I interviewed believe that often it is not regular people that have a problem with each other, but those in power who make the decisions. Among the athletes I interviewed, only one Israeli tennis player did, in fact, face an Arab athlete, an Egyptian. The Israeli said that he had extra motivation

because Arabs do not like Israel. He competed in Egypt against the Egyptian, and he noticed that even the referees did not like the Israeli. The referees made bad line calls and bad decisions against the Israeli, which made it especially tough to play in that situation. Another Israeli athlete said that she would most certainly feel extra motivation against an Arab, but that this is something out of her control which happens subliminally. Arabs and Israelis are fighting all the time, so it is natural to experience such feelings. In a way, it is a type of rivalry. Lastly, one interviewee said that encounters between himself and Arabs go either really well or really badly. While he would be willing to compete against an Arab opponent who shows animosity towards him and Israel, he also realizes that Israelis and Palestinians have a lot in common. Culturally, they can bond over food, Arabic slang (which Israelis also use), and the importance of family. Nonetheless, as to the question whether he has more incentive to beat an Arab during competition than someone from a non-Arab country, his answer was one hundred percent “yes,” because he believes Israelis have a set of values that is completely different to that of Palestinians.

7. *What do you believe are the main barriers to understanding and acceptance between people of Israeli and Palestinian descent?*

For the Arab athletes, the main barriers are an unwillingness to listen to each other, cognitive dissonance between the two peoples, as well as ethnic, religious, and financial factors. Specifically, the Palestinian-Jordanian runner believes that the problem is the inability by Israelis, regardless of their grievances, to see and acknowledge that what is happening on the ground in Palestine is absolutely, categorically, unacceptably horrific. She added that also problematic is the firmly entrenched belief that Israelis are victims being attacked and on the

verge of destruction, when, in fact, the reality is they have an impressive military, largely funded by the U.S., they are occupying others, and, because of their history and influence, are tried differently in the court of public opinion. She continued by saying that one cannot hold the fact that Israelis were born into their system against them, but one can hold them accountable for how they think and apply critical judgement skills. Being able to look at a situation with a critical mind and acknowledge that what is happening is not tolerable is the first step towards mutual acceptance and understanding. Those factors are why she was able to have constructive conversations with her Israeli teammate in college. Conversation and respect occurred, because the Israeli teammate acknowledged that he was born into a system in which he believes, but that this system is not one of which he is blindly proud. Acknowledging controversy and nuance, even mistakes, and being open to looking beyond the information one is continuously being fed are critical to discourse. The athletes agreed that one does not control what system one is born into. However, once a person is more mature, can read, is taught critical thinking, has access to the Internet, that person can assess the relative scale of killing and death and has to acknowledge that something is very wrong. The Egyptian squash player went on to say that Israel is intent on eliminating Palestinians. They are committing genocide because they do not want Palestinians to exist anymore. They want to completely take over Palestine. Religion is another barrier, as the intolerance of fundamentalist Jews and Muslims toward each other exacerbates the political and geographic problems. Lastly, the financial factor presents a barrier, because Israel is a rich country that wants to get even richer by taking over Palestinian land and its natural resources, while the Palestinians are living under an occupation that keeps them impoverished.

For the Israeli athletes, the main barrier is that not all Arab countries recognize the right of Israel to exist as its own independent state. Israel wants to be recognized as an official home for

Jewish people. Once that has been established, one can start negotiating about terms and how to live together peacefully. However, as of now, the Palestinian leadership does not accept Israel as the Jewish state; instead, they continue to want to eliminate Jews from what they consider the rightful land of the Palestinians. This puts the Israelis in a difficult spot because if that is the Palestinians' attitude, then it is an either/or proposition: either the Israelis or the Palestinians get to stay. Another problem they mentioned is that many people are not knowledgeable about the facts and history. They do not know enough about what is happening in the conflict, and when they see the numbers, they say Israel is the bad guy. But Israelis all believe that terrorist organizations, such as Hamas, are the root of the problem. They agree that most Palestinian civilians just want peace. However, they argue that so long as there is a Hamas, what most civilians want is irrelevant, since so long as there is a Hamas, Israelis are not safe. When I asked them whether they thought that if Israel gave back parts of the West Bank and Gaza to the Palestinians, as was offered in a deal on the table in the 1990s which the Palestinian leadership rejected, whether that would calm down the situation and offer a solution to the current crisis. While they wish it would help, they all said 'no.' They believe Palestinians would not be satisfied with anything Israel offered now, because at this point, it is not even about the land anymore. Israel does not know what Palestine wants besides eliminating Israel. If they were to go back to one of the past offers, Palestinians might just want more. Experience, wars, and history tell them not to trust the Palestinian leadership.

8. *What role do you think sports can play in overcoming these barriers?*

Most of the athletes think this conflict is too big for sports to be able to have a profound effect on its resolution. However, they all had ideas about what the sports world could do to

improve the situation. One of the suggestions was that leaving politics out of sports should be mandatory, to be enforced by international sports authorities. Sports should be a safe space where political opinions do not have a place in the encounter. If politics are kept out of sports, then athletes would always shake each other's hands, for example, even if the opponents come from Israel and an Arab country. Sports should be a platform where one can compete against foreigners, even ones from enemy countries, and still feel safe from political repercussions, as if someone is having everyone's back. In truth, not shaking hands or refusing to compete is the easy way out. If Israeli and Arab athletes would always shake hands, then the majority of those back home would most likely be impressed. Intentionally leaving politics out of sports could potentially show the world that something different than the status quo is possible.

What followed this idea of mandating that sports be completely apolitical, were ideas that would require sports to do almost the opposite. One suggestion was that sports, because of its public platform, could be employed as a tool to spread knowledge. Many people worldwide have little idea about what exactly is happening on the ground and do not fully understand the history and the respective claims of the two sides, and yet those people still draw conclusions. One of the Israeli athletes said that not many people know that there are Arab cities inside the borders of Israel, that there are Arab ministers in the government, and that there are Arab soccer teams in the Israeli first league. Learning just that could help many people understand that Israel does not categorically have something against Arabs and that Israel is already willing to live side by side with Arabs. Another Israeli said that the influence of social media is a big, often negative, factor, but that it could be used for good. The fact that people are ignorant and believe too much of what they see on social media, without questioning it, is a problem. According to him, many people automatically side with the underdog and divide the world into oppressor and oppressed without

ever knowing the facts. Employing sports as a platform on social media, if done the right way, could be a useful educational and balancing tool. Imagine seeing an Israeli and a Palestinian athlete being great friends on and off the court and showcasing that on social media; it could have a positive impact. Moreover, just spreading the facts in encounters with people during sports-related travel can also have an impact.

Something else sports could do is to have the big-name corporations in the sports industry listen and offer a platform. They should let athletes speak up honestly but always civilly. Often, when athletes speak up about a political issue, their statements are so filtered that they seem to be saying nothing. The reason is because of the potential financial repercussions. Professional athletes play their sport for a living, and therefore they cannot afford to risk losing sponsorships, endorsements, their good image. If the major sports companies would grant athletes more leeway to voice their opinions without pulling the financial rug out from under their feet, it could have a great impact on the acceptance and normalization of a range of opinions. Such opinions might be controversial at times but would always have to be well thought through and delivered civilly. In this way, sports could function as a valuable and constructive platform for fostering understanding. On a more provocative note, the Palestinian-Jordanian runner thinks that countries that continue to commit human rights violations need to be held accountable. This goes directly against what most of the other athletes said regarding leaving politics out of sports. Just as South Africa was not invited to the Olympics during apartheid, just as Russia was banned from the 2022 World Cup after the invasion of Ukraine, so Israel should experience repercussions now. She added that excluding a country from international competition ought to happen systematically and consistently, based upon a previously agreed upon, established set of criteria, rather than as the consequence of a subjective, impromptu decision. Such an exclusion

would be a powerful, international statement and condemnation. Moreover, she acknowledged that the short-term benefit of such a strong political statement would negatively impact the gains that can be made through sports. Situations do not change and improve overnight; it is incremental progress. She believes that sports contribute to that incremental change through conversations among athletes, spectators, and all those involved, leading to increased curiosity and greater understanding. The ban of an entire country would have the opposite effect.

9. Do you believe that increased interaction in sports between Israelis and Palestinians would improve relations? Why or why not?

Everyone except two people said that they do not think increased interaction in sports between the two sides would help, the reason being that tensions are currently too high. There is just too much hatred between the two sides. While tensions are higher now than usual, there has always been a level of disdain for one another. This conflict has been going on for so long, for generations. One of the Israelis said that as long as Israel has enemies all around its borders, whether it's Lebanon, Syria, or Gaza, basically the entire Middle East is Arab or Muslim, it would be difficult to get to an agreement through sports. The hatred and most recent loss of life on both sides are too vast to permit a friendly soccer match or other form of competition between Israel and Palestine. However, in the future, if concrete, positive steps are taken toward enabling a peaceful coexistence, there would be a possibility for that to happen. If politics could be kept out of sports, then it could potentially also work. One of the Arab athletes also said she does not think it could work, especially now. It would put Palestinian athletes in a position where they have to face athletes that live in the same geographical space, technically, but are treated completely differently. It would normalize the Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, and it would

suggest that they are both afforded the luxury of preparation and safety, which is not at all the case, especially in the current climate. At the end of the day, as an athlete, one respects that another athlete has put in the hours just like everyone else, and one respects that they have worked tirelessly towards a goal that is extremely difficult to achieve, namely, to represent their country at an international level. However, those athletes are ambassadors of their country, so continuing to put them on a playing field where they are seen as equal to their competitor, she does not think is fair.

10. If not sport, do you think other organizations that bring the two cultures together help with peacebuilding in the countries?

In the athletes' minds, such efforts are too good to be true and mostly just for propaganda. One of the comments was that the decision to participate in organizations such as Seeds of Peace (SOP) (discussed in the Literature Review) is usually not even made by the participant, but the person is being forced. These organizations are a way to pretend to the world that everyone is in this difficult situation together; and all is amicable, when in reality there is deep-seated disdain and animosity. A different athlete said that teaching the young generation not just about the conflict, but also teaching them about the other side and their points of view would be great. Interacting with the other side would be awesome. It would be great to get to know the other side and demonstrate that the two sides can, in fact get along. Unfortunately, though, it probably will not have a great impact because at the end of the day, it is not up to the young generation to make the decisions. It is the leaders that have the last say. One of the athletes was a bit more optimistic about the question and said that it could potentially work once matters settle down and the two sides can sit down and have a civil conversation. This athlete believes there are so many

similarities between the two peoples, and that especially Israeli children and Palestinian children are alike. It is about whether the two sides can accept the idea of living together side-by-side. To him, civilians, kids, and teenagers would come together and would connect without having too many problems. However, when it comes to the governments and the leadership, problems start arising, which is exacerbated by the fact that there is corruption involved. For the Palestinian-Jordanian runner, once again, the problem is the dynamic of oppressor and oppressed. These non-governmental organizations' efforts to bring people together are an opt out way to have Israelis pretend to look at Palestinians as equals. She thinks the two sides are at a point right now that is so far beyond that. There have been organizations outside the arena of sports, such as EcoPeace Middle East, and other efforts focused on global issues to help find common ground. Issues that transcend borders, such as climate, affect everyone and can only be solved together, and hence have been used to generate conversation and mutual understanding to help bring about peace. In many respects, like EcoPeace for example, they do some good work. The same can be said of sporting events or anything that generates dialogue. However, she believes that this moment does not call for that type of conversation. There needs to be real action on the ground. She does not reject the idea of organizations such as SOP, but she asks herself who is creating them. Who are the people that are participating and where does one recruit them? What are their roles? There ought to be parallelisms between the people on each side. One cannot have a group of boys who are playing in a refugee camp come and play with another team that is living a free, normal life and expect them to see eye to eye going forward. That sort of power dynamic does not bring about much change. It becomes more of a spectacle.

11. Please share any additional thoughts or experiences you have regarding the relationship between sports, nationality, and ethnicity.

Sports take a person to so many different places. Not only does one end up interacting with people from different backgrounds, but the various locations allow one to experience different physical and cultural environments, different living conditions and different customs and attitudes. One ends up not only noticing but appreciating the differences. One of the Egyptian athletes mentioned that for him the dynamic between sports, nationality, and ethnicity has been great. He has competed against and gotten to know people with different backgrounds from all over the world. From a young age, he began to make new contacts in the various countries, and eventually, when they were old enough to travel unsupervised to competitions, they planned trips together. One of the Israeli athletes said that wherever he went to represent his country, whether it was with the youth national team, at under fourteens, under sixteens, Junior Davis Cup, he never had problems with kids from other nations. He played the European Championships with Turkish guys and got along well with them. Wherever he went, he would always try to represent the beliefs that he held while at the same time not judging anyone based on where they were from or what language they spoke. He just wanted to get along and get to know each person as a human being. He believes that in the end, they are all much more alike than the media and the conflicts raging in the world suggest.

12. What suggestions do you have for using sports as a tool to improve relations between people of different nationalities or ethnicities?

One of the Israeli athletes stood out by stating that soccer could help, for example. He believes that getting Israelis and Palestinians to face each other in a soccer match would be a

healthy, productive encounter. One could spread the news on social media, showcasing that regular Israelis and Palestinians can get along and enjoy friendly competition. Judging from earlier responses, most of the athletes I interviewed would disagree, most likely arguing that the timing for such an effort is completely wrong and that at this moment in history, the two sides would more likely try to kill each other than kick the soccer ball. One very interesting suggestion was hosting a debate among athletes. One could bring together Israeli and Arab athletes at universities and have them participate in an open discussion on a panel. This could even become an NCAA event, devoted to fostering collegiality among college athletes and beyond. Imagine the NCAA officially sponsoring a panel to mitigate conflict between pro-Palestinian athletes and pro-Israeli athletes. It could have an impact. And then imagine the concept spreading to the NBA, MLB, NHL, etc. That would mean broad impact.

On the other hand, several athletes reiterated that if the emphasis were placed squarely on sport rather than the politics of the players' countries of origin or other divisive factors, it would allow athletes to focus solely on excelling at their sport. Ultimately in sport, it is not race, nationality, class, religion, gender, sexual orientation that count, but rather hitting the ball over the net, kicking the ball in the goal, running fastest, whatever the objective of a given sport. There is beauty, purity, and joy in pursuing such a simple purpose, which both athletes and spectators desperately need at this moment in time. This line of argument led right back to using sports as a platform to show that both sides can get along. Not shaking another athlete's hand means participating in the conflict and saying that it is acceptable to be in conflict. It allows politics to encroach upon sports. The athlete who made this point said she would like to use her sport to learn more about the other side. If she could change just one person's perspective on the conflict and help them understand her point of view, she would be happy. She herself wants to

understand why people support the other side. Spreading information and educating people through one's sport can be very helpful. This might involve only a small group of people, but that number could grow exponentially. Lastly, interviewees mentioned the unifying effect that sports have on the athlete community through mutual respect for the hard work involved. Being together, sharing experiences, exchanging stories brings people closer together and is fun. Personal stories get etched into a person's memory far more firmly and deeply than a news editorial ever will, which can hopefully lead to a change in attitude.

Discussion

I would like to begin by stating that every single one of my interviewees is devastated about what is currently transpiring in the Israel-Palestine conflict. Interviewing these athletes drove home for me the severity and difficulty of the situation. When I read about the Israel-Palestine conflict in the news, I am deeply troubled, but it is not the same as talking face to face with people who have been personally impacted by the conflict all their lives and for whom the death and destruction of the past seven months hit so close to home. Listening to them, I felt their pain, frustration, anger, as well as longing and simultaneous reluctance to believe in the possibility of change. Everyone made persuasive arguments, and though I was sometimes taken aback, their responses resonated with me and made sense. I noticed that whenever I finished an interview with an Israeli, I thought to myself, "Wow, Israel must be right," and whenever I completed an interview with an Arab athlete, I thought, "Wow, Palestine must be right." I admonished myself to try to gain some clarity, but quickly realized that, while there are certainly wrongs being committed in this conflict, there is no absolute right or wrong side. The situation is so complex, and each side has valid arguments, claims, and grievances, which could never be

arranged into one cohesive, preeminent narrative acceptable to both sides. I recalled that there were contradictions even within the narratives of individual athletes, as, for example, the Israeli who acknowledged there are many cultural traditions Israelis and Palestinians have in common, but in the next sentence claimed that they have completely different values.

However, then I reminded myself that the Biton and Salomon goal outlined in the Literature Review is not that the two sides arrive at a single, cohesive, conclusive narrative, but that the opposing narrative be legitimized in the eyes of Israelis and Palestinians. The same can be said of Sagy, Kaplan, and Adwan, who believe that the key is the mutual recognition of the historical narrative on each side and the ability to understand and acknowledge each other's pain. Although I do not believe that sports can materially impact this deep-seated, complex conflict and its resolution, my primary research does suggest that, like the exchange and education programs described in the Literature Review, sports have a positive impact on athletes by humanizing one side in the eyes of the other, familiarizing each side with the perspective of the other, and making the conflict appear more nuanced and less monolithic, which were key factors listed by Biton and Salomon. While athletes were no less insistent about their side being right, they expressed more understanding of the "other." This is likely due to their opportunity to travel and meet people from all over the world with very different backgrounds. My interviewees have been exposed to significantly more ethnic and religious diversity than the average Israeli or Arab. They were able to sit down and speak with athletes from the opposing side and hear their narratives and discover commonalities. For some of them on college teams, this even led to friendships, while others arrived at relationships of mutual respect. This exposure and exchange likely enhanced their "cognitive flexibility," the ability to shift perspectives cited by Miller-Graff and Cummings as necessary to break down the strong stereotyping of the "other." Moreover,

Dubow talks about “observational learning” as being one of the most powerful learning mechanisms for children. For youth athletes who are watching their supposed enemies compete on the court or the track like all the other athletes, they are observing not a violent enemy but someone very much like themselves. SOP is the program built on the premise that peace is made between peoples and not between governments. If that is true, then sports can play a role in the process of making peace. Just like SOP graduates are more likely to stay active in peacebuilding, so athletes are more likely to continue to build bridges and relationships with those “others” they have encountered through the sports circuit and beyond.

All the athletes I interviewed gave a lot of thought to how sports could be used to improve the relationship between Israelis and Palestinians and reduce conflict in general. They came up with creative, impactful suggestions from spreading stories and knowledge through travel to grassroots competitions to showcasing Palestinian-Israeli athlete encounters on social media to big-name corporations giving athletes a platform to organizing discussion panels at universities and possibly within professional sports leagues. Interestingly, the athletes’ dream scenarios for sports swung like a pendulum between the extreme of keeping politics out of sports entirely in order to show humanity that healthy, clean competition is possible between countries in conflict and bring joy to the world and the other extreme of utilizing the popularity and reach of sports in a variety of ways for constructive, political messaging in order to inform people about the conflict in a balanced, civil way. A big caveat is that the Palestinian-Jordanian athlete argued that a sports competition between Israel and Palestine must not take place at this moment as it would normalize the occupation of Palestine by Israel and the very unequal conditions under which they live. Unsurprisingly, the athletes themselves would love to be able to cast politics aside completely while training and competing so as to focus wholeheartedly on the sport they

love. But they admitted they could not disregard entirely who was on the other side of the net or the track next to them. In the end, their reflective thought processes showed that they were well aware that their experiences in international sports had had a positive impact on their perception of the “other,” which, in turn, led them to try to figure out ways to spread that impact.

Encouraging Arab and Israeli children to become involved in sports makes sense for a more straightforward reason. Through sports, one learns to deal with adversity, get over losses, recover from setbacks, follow rules, and handle belligerent opponents and ill-disposed referees. One gets to let out aggression in a positive, healthy way. One learns discipline and hard work and the rewards of committing to both. One hopefully gets to experience the high of victory and most definitely gets to have fun and make friends. One gets to know one’s own strengths and weaknesses and gains confidence when one improves. One learns to read people and keep cool when someone tries to get under one’s skin. One learns to cope in unfamiliar environments and gets to know oneself. These are life lessons that build character, taught ‘in a language youth understands,’ as Nelson Mandela said. The mental fortitude and flexibility gained through sports can be applied in any setting, including school, the workplace, local politics, international relations, anywhere where there is human interaction.

While they were more empathetic towards the other side than non-athletes, ultimately athletes were just as convinced as non-athletes that their side is in the right and the other is in the wrong. It was not what I had expected to find. But having absorbed them ever since early childhood, those beliefs are too deeply ingrained in their brains to be profoundly changed. There were strong similarities among the responses of the Israeli athletes and strong similarities among those of the Egyptian athletes. While all the Arab athletes were in support of Palestine, the two Egyptians’ answers differed somewhat from those of the Palestinian-Jordanian runner, probably

because Israel and Egypt have a formal peace treaty in place and because the current death, destruction and suffering in Gaza must be even more painful and distressing to the Palestinian-Jordanian. The Egyptians were more open to the possibility of negotiating with Israel. This showed that the most important factor is where one was brought up because that profoundly shapes one's opinions. I found it frustrating to hear from the athletes about the many experiences and cultural practices they all have in common, the extent to which they can express empathy for the other side and have built relationships and bridges across divides, and yet have them stubbornly remain the seemingly two most diametrically opposed peoples on the planet. It will be interesting to sit down with some of my interviewees to discuss my findings; I hope they will be more struck by the common ground than the age-old divisions. It also would be interesting to expand my limited pool of seven athletes to include a wider range of sports and Arab/Muslim countries and simply a greater number of athletes, so as to delve more deeply into differences based on nationality, ethnicity, education, sport, and gender.

I embarked upon my thesis with the idea that sports can transcend politics and that sports can help adversaries to overcome their differences and potentially help to bring two opposing sides together in peace. After conducting secondary and primary research, my conclusion is that sports unfortunately do not trump politics. In fact, examples such as Olympic boycotts and exclusions, whether one believes that they are useful or that they exacerbate a given crisis, demonstrate a perversion of the Olympic ideal of friendly competition and peace in order to pursue rather than transcend political agendas. Moreover, each of my interviewees gave examples from their own experience of politics intruding on sports rather than sports transcending politics. Secondly, my research showed that while sports can help opposing sides to develop some empathy for the other, in cases of long-term, entrenched conflict such as the

Israel–Palestine conflict, sports can only contribute small steps towards reconciliation but will most likely not result in solving such deep-seated, intractable conflicts. Nonetheless, with modest objectives, sports (particularly at the grassroots and international levels) provide a medium for people of all religions, nationalities, genders, ages, physical abilities, and ethnic backgrounds to better understand each other.

While I do not harbor great hope for a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict in the immediate future, I do believe the moment will come. If Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries demand from Israel steps toward a two-state solution before normalizing relations with Israel and committing to protecting Israel, that moment might come sooner than expected. At that moment, the two peoples will need to learn to live in peace. Sports can then play an important part in that process by humanizing each side in the eyes of the other, as each of my interviewees demonstrated so compellingly. Moreover, Nelson Mandela, whose speech inspired me to embark on this project, believed that sports contributed to dismantling the deeply embedded, long-standing system of segregation that was apartheid. Though she strongly qualified her statement, it was the Jordanian-Palestinian runner who remarked that sports, possibly more than anything else, brings together people from so many different parts of the world and so many walks of life. In the midst of division and hate, it is of the utmost importance to figure out any which way one can help humanity to flourish.

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