



## Football and politics in Israel

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### Abstract

The article tries to show the political context of sport, especially football, in Israel. It shows different aspects and specificity of the Jewish state, which has influence on this discipline. It is also about important sport events in the history of this country. What football league looks like and its image, the roots of clubs, are some others topics contained here. The work also tries to explain the role of sport in this young country, which, paradoxically, has a long tradition. It shows how the government uses sport to break barriers between nations and what the viewpoint of Palestinians is on these attempts. The paper describes various groups of fans and their political activity and discovers the background of matches in Israel.

**Keywords:** football, fans, supporters, Israel, Palestine, politics, Betar, Maccabi, Hapoel, Jews, Arabs

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## INTRODUCTION

If we look deeper into sport, we will see much more than players, scores and entertainment for the masses. Some disciplines, especially very popular football, on which we are focusing, have many interesting backgrounds. There are politics, history, traditions, social context and much more. Israel is one of the most interesting examples of how sport can be linked with politics. This perspective on the border of history, sociology and politology was interesting for some researchers. Yair Galily is the author of *Sport, Politics and Society in Israel: The First Fifty-five Years* [1]. Another interesting paper about football and politics in Israel is *From community to commodity: the commodification of football in Israel* by Amir Ben Porat [2]. Tamir Sorek wrote about Arab football in Israel - *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State* [3]. This same researcher was focusing on integrative role of this game in *Arab football in Israel as an 'integrative enclave'* [4]. Mifalot soccer programs and the coexistence of young Palestinian, Jordanian, and Jewish people are the topics of the thesis - *Coexistence and sport: the Israeli case*, by Yair Galily, Michael Leitner and Pini Shimon [5]. John Sugden wrote about another similar program, Football for Peace, in *The challenge of using a values-based approach to coaching sport and community relations in multi-cultural settings. The case of Football for Peace (F4P) in Israel* [6]. We can also find some journalist articles, especially about the current situation in Israel. For example, a review of football fans movement in Israel was published in a Polish magazine about supporters culture *To My Kibice* [7]. It is worth mentioning a movie documentary *Forever Pure* about the situation inside the Beitar Jerusalem, when two Chechens came to the club [8]. More about this case on the next pages.

## DEMOGRAPHIC AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

When Israel declared independence in 1948, there were only 806,000 people in the country. In 1949 it had 1 million and almost 10 years later 2 million of residents [9]. Now (data from 2016) there are 8,547 m people in the Jewish state. There is 6,393 m of Jews and 1,777 m of Arabs [10]. In the beginning of Israel's existence, most people lived in Tel-Aviv district (36% of all), the second place was Hajfa district (20%), and the smallest number of residents lived in the Southern district (3%). Over the years this statistics has changed. According to data from 2000, the largest population is in the central district (23%), the second place is for Tel-Aviv district (18%), the third is the Northern district (17%). The smallest now is the youngest district, Judea-Samaria-Gaza. The Jerusalem district is one of the smallest, in 1949 10 % of the population lived there, now it is around 12 % [11]. What is also important is that in Northern and Southern districts there is just 25 % of Jews and more than twice as many Arabs (56%) [11]. The biggest city is Jerusalem (658 000), the next is Tel Aviv (353,000), Haifa (271,000) and Rishon LeZiyyon (203,000). Nazareth is called informally "Arabs' capital city of Israel", because it is the biggest city (58 000) of the Northern District populated mostly by Arabs [11]. All numbers here are probably now bigger, because the population of Israel over the years has still been growing. This statistics is necessary to understand the shape of the state and the topic, because football is linked with demographic, economic, industrial and national situation.

## THE ROLE OF SPORT IN ISRAEL

The next important thing to understand this topic is some knowledge about the role of sport. We have to remember that Jews moved to Israel. Mainly from Russia, Ukraine (in the past both were in USSR), Romania, Poland, also Germany, Hungary, United States and many more countries [12]. Sport helps to unite the nation, because it doesn't matter from which part of Europe or globe we are if now we support the same national team and other sport organizations [2]. Especially if the team is successful, it is creating a positive image and unites of whole nation [1]. What is more, doing sport, also recreationally, teaches people to cooperate and breaks barriers. The second important role is uniting nations. As we know from history, there is a lot of tension among Jews and Arabs. Sport is a way of reducing social differences. In many sport clubs players and athletes are from both nations. If we check the squads, in almost every team we can find a footballer like Hassan Abu Zaid (Hapoel Tel-Aviv), Iyad Abu Abaid (Maccabi Haifa) or Mohammad Ghadir (Hapoel Beer Sheva) [13]. Even some Arab-Palestine

footballers play in Israeli national team, like for example Ahmed Abed, who played a few times in Israel U21 national team and one time in senior squad, or Mohammed Kalibat, who represented youth national Israel team fourteen times [13]. It worth mentioning that there is also the Palestine national football team. There are some special programs in Israel, mainly for young people, to integrate Arabs and Jews through football and other disciplines. They organize events, tournaments and mixed teams. "Get to Know Your Neighbor" is a project from Mifalot Education and Society Enterprises. The purpose of this program is to integrate Palestinian, Jordanian and Jewish children from the same neighborhood by playing football together [5,14]. Each participant completes a questionnaire before starting the program and once again after one year of participation. Palestinians and Jordanians get a version in Arabic and Jews get the same questionnaire in Hebrew. Teenagers answered questions about relations with Arabs and Jews. They declared that during one year the image of the second nation changed to a more positive one. For example, 38% Arab children were ready to have a Jewish Israeli friend before the beginning of the program and after one year this percentage grew to 64%. Some Arabs said that they already had a Jewish friend (27,5%), a year before it was just 1% [5]. A similar process took place among young Jews. "Ready to have a Palestinian friend" was marked by 47% of teenagers (before it was 36%). More Jews have Arab friends, 23,5%, previously just 4% [5]. There were more questions, but generally in both groups a positive view of the neighboring nation got stronger. Football for Peace (F4P) is another example of an integrative program by football. We can read about this international idea that "it is a diplomatic sports movement that creates dialogue and unites people" [15]. One of the biggest challenges was including girls in this project, and not causing any tension. The organizers had to remember that Oriental reality is different than Western [6].

According to a press analysis by Tamir Sorek, Arab-Palestinian role of sport is different. Israel has used sport to unite people and break barriers, Arabs, on the other hand, to promote Palestinian national pride. This naturally means conflict and differences of interest [4].

## SPORTS ORGANIZATIONS

The first sport organizations were closely linked to politics and ideology. Maccabi (name from Macabees family) was affiliated mainly with higher class and middle class of Zionists [1]. The next one, Hapoel, means *the worker* in Hebrew. This organization was part of Histadrut (General Organization of Workers in the Land of Israel) and was linked mainly to socialist movement and the working class [1, 2]. Betar is a name taken from revisionist Zionists youth movement Betar (also spelled Beitar) founded by Ze'ev Jabotinsky in 1923 in Riga [16]. Betar sport organization affiliated mainly right-wing Jews [1]. Another movement was created by Elitzur (from male name, which means *My god is my rock*), which affiliated mainly Religious-Zionism people [1, 17]. This ideology says that the settlement of Palestine is a religious obligation for Jews. There are many clubs that are called Maccabi, Hapoel, Elitzur in many different disciplines, but football, which is the most popular sport, Elitzur doesn't have a famous team. Why? Because a lot of matches in professional league take place on Saturday during the Sabbath. This is incompatible with their orthodox convictions [1]. As we can see, sport is like a metaphor of politics. If we check for example teams in Ligat Ha'al (Premier League in Israel), we can see how much divided, politically and ideologically, people are in Israel.

## IMPORTANT HISTORICAL SPORT EVENTS RELATED TO POLITICS

In young modern history of the state there were some important dates in sport. Some success, for example six golden medals for the Jewish delegation in Asian Games in Bangkok in 1970 or the victory of Maccabi Tel-Aviv in European Champions Basketball Cup 1977. A few sad moments as well, like the corruption affair in Israeli football (1917) [1]. The most famous and tragic day in Israeli sport history is definitely 5<sup>th</sup> September 1972, the massacre in Munich. During the Summer Olympic Games, Palestinian organization Black September killed eleven hostages – sportsmen and coaches [18]. In the same decade Israel began its journey through various federations. Arab countries have been leading the Israeli policy of isolation. Consequently, the Jews left the Asian Football Confederation and moved

to Oceania Football Confederation. Finally, they joined UEFA in 1994 and have stayed there until today. FIFA tried to protect Israel against confrontation with Arab countries [1].

## CONTEMPORARY IMAGE OF SPORT IN ISRAEL

The 1980s was the time of privatization, so clubs left political organizations, but politics is still present on the stadiums. Mostly socialist support clubs like Hapoel Tel-Aviv or Hapoel Jerusalem, right-wing Beitar. Maccabi is mainly right-wing or apolitical, but it is more mixed than the others [1]. In Israeli top league there are 14 clubs playing. Most are from the seaside – Ashkelon (1 club), Ashdod (1), Tel-Aviv (3), Ra'anana (1), Haifa (2), Kfar Sava (1), Petah Tikva (1). The two last cities have tens of kilometers to Mediterranean Sea. A few teams are from the inland – Jerusalem (1), Beer-Sheva (1), Sakhnin (1) and Kiryat Ata (1) [19]. In Ligat Ha'al there are seven clubs, which have "Hapoel" in their names. There are three "Maccabi", and one "Betar". The other three have no affiliation to any political organization in their names. Obviously, in Israel there are more "Hapoel's", "Maccabi's" and "Betar's" clubs outside the top league. There are many Arab football clubs, mostly in lower divisions, which are part of Israeli Football Association [4]. Let us remember that around 20 % of the population of Israel is Arab. Despite this, as much as 42 % football clubs represented villages and cities, or neighborhoods in the mixed cities, where Arabs dominate (data from season 1997-98) [4]. In the Israeli Premier League there is only one club which represents Arabs – FC Bnei Sakhnin. The team is from a city in the north, Sakhnin, where 95% of the population is Arab. During the matches it is possible to see Palestinian flags on the stands [7]. According to a survey done in 2000 (at that time FC Bnei Sakhnin didn't play in the top league), two-thirds of Arab men supported a club from the highest division. Most Palestinians pointed to Maccabi Haifa (35%), Hapoel Haifa (13,6%), or Hapoel Tel Aviv (10%) [3]. As we can see, almost 50% Arabs chose clubs from Haifa, which is in the north of Israel. It is worth remembering that in this part of the country most of the population is Palestinian. Why do Arabs support Israeli clubs, like Maccabi, or Hapoel, or others with clearly Jewish roots? Some people are looking for apolitical, integrative and just entertainment spheres in sport. Palestinian supporters explain that Arab footballers also play in clubs from Haifa, and being a fan of, for example Maccabi Haifa, does not mean supporting an Israeli club. For them, the team represents Haifa, a city where Jewish and Arab cultures coexist, so they want to identify with this place. A club is not a national team, so in that sense they don't support Israel [3]. The next question in the survey was interesting too – "Do you consider yourself a fan of a team not in the Premier League?" Most, 58,8%, respondents said "yes". They pointed options: a team representing the respondent's town - 26.4%, an Arab team from a different locality - 31.5%, and just 0.9% pointed to a Jewish team [3]. As we can see, support for Arab teams, which are mostly in lower leagues, is still strong. Contrary to appearances, there are a lot of examples of Jewish footballers who have supporters in Arab clubs [4]. Interestingly enough, although Arabs recognize Hebrew as the public language (in the offices, in the administration, etc.), they also usually use this language on the stadium when supporting their team [4].

## FOOTBALL CLUBS AND FANS IN ISRAEL

Let's check some interesting examples of football clubs, atmosphere, fan organizations, political context and views on the Israeli stadiums. Almost all clubs in Israel have a group of fans, who support the team, not just because they like football but also because they feel an emotional attachment to the club. They identify themselves politically with the club [2]. As we remember, Hapoel Tel-Aviv was affiliated with Histadrut (General Organization of Workers in the Land of Israel) and socialist movement. At present, there is a group of supporters *Ultras Hapoel* on the Hapoel's stadium, which is radical left-wing. This informal organization is made up, among others, of members of Antifa. They accept Arabs and Jews inside the group. *Ultras Hapoel* often shows banners and flags with hammer and sickle, Che Guevara or Karl Marx [7]. The members describe their own group as left-wing, they accept the coexistence of all inhabitants in Israel, and some of them sympathize with the anarchist movement. According to an international website-platform for left-wing football fans (RebelUltras) from around the world, they think: "Zionism in its original definition is long gone and

past away from this world. Zionism has been replaced by nationalism, aggression, fascism and racism. Israeli nationalism is one of the worst we know. The depression of Arab-Muslims is very wide, the discrimination is totally unbelievable and we try, in our own way, to demonstrate and show our stand against it. We are against the occupation and the policy of the state of Israel, and sometimes we try to demonstrate it in games and outside of them." [20,21] The biggest enemies of Hapoel Ultras are the fans of Maccabi Tel-Aviv (local rivals with bourgeois roots) and right-wing Beitar Jerusalem [7]. Maccabi is the most popular team in Tel-Aviv. The main group, Maccabi Fanatics, describes its views as Israeli patriotic. Most fans are right-wing [7]. Another one, "red", small, but also radical group is *Brigade Malcha* from football club Hapoel Katamom Jerusalem. They are also multicultural and have connections with Antifa from Jerusalem. *Brigade Malcha* presents communist symbols, images of Karl Marx, Che Guevara and Mahatma Gandhi [7]. On the Sammy Ofer Stadium of Maccabi Haifa politics is not dominant. As we mentioned earlier, Jews and Arabs support this club together. In the history of the team there were many Palestinian footballers. They identify with the city. Both nations are part of *Green Apes 2002*, a group which creates the atmosphere on the Maccabi Haifa matches. A totally different situation can be seen in Beitar Jerusalem, whose supporters are right-wing Jewish nationalist. As was mentioned earlier, the name of the club is associated with the organization of Ze'ev Jabotinsky – Betar. The emblem of the team, which has menorah in the center, shows how important the Jewish tradition is for this club. The biggest active group on the Beitar matches is *La Familia*. The hottest matches are against Palestinian Bnei Sakhnin F.C, during which fans from Jerusalem sing for example "death to the Arabs" or "Muhammad is a homosexual". Beitar fans are on the top of the list of incidents which organization New Israel Fund recognizes as racist [6]. After offensive chants to fans of Bnei Sakhnin in 2007, Israeli football federation decided to close the stadium of Beitar for fans for the next match. As part of the revenge, *La Familia* set fire to the office of the federation and painted the acronym of the group on it. Beitar fans disturbed a minute of silence for prime minister Ichak Rabin (he signed the agreement in Oslo in 1993) and they also chanted the name of the extremist who killed him - Yigal Amir [22]. Members of *La Familia* attacked Arab workers in McDonald in 2012. One year later they started campaigning against two Chechen footballers who moved to Beitar Jerusalem [7]. This story is shown in the documentary "Forever Pure". Maya Zinshtein followed the atmosphere of the club when two Muslims came to the squad [8]. *La Familia* is known for displaying symbols of Kach. It is a political organization founded by Meir Kahane, who, by the way, was a member of Betar in his youth [23]. However, ideology of Kach is different. They want to create pure Israel, without Arabs. The leader of the organization explained in an interview: "I would offer financial compensation to those who want to leave the country voluntarily. I would use force only for those who do not want to leave" [23]. He also wanted to ban the Jewish-Arab couple relations and sexual contact between these two nations. Kahane proposed the penalty of five years in prison for mixed couples [23]. Kach tries to break the stereotype of Jews as victims and change the image of the nation to brave and strong [23]. They want to create a theocratic state, which would be based on Tora and Halakha (a set of religious rules and explanations about how to use them in life) [23]. Kach also had a military branch of the organization, which prepared terrorist attacks against Arabs. Israeli government and the USA banned Kach and Kahane Chai (Kahane Lives, which was founded after Kahane's assassination in 1990) and recognized them as terrorist organizations in 1994 [23]. In Israel some movements still continue the ideology of Kach. Flags with a clenched fist and a star in the background, which we can see on the Betar matches, show that *La Familia* supports Kach movement too.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sport is an important part of political life. Especially football is powerful, because of its popularity. Analysis of clubs and leagues in Israel shows that sport can be a metaphor of the political scene. There are also many influences from the history and traditions, which make an interesting background. It is worth noting that football attracts extreme political options like the communist movement (Hapoel Tel-Aviv or Hapoel Jerusalem) or for example Kach (Beitar Jerusalem). Stadiums give the opportunity to feel part of a strong community. It is also an occasion to express one's emotions, sometimes connect to the politics. We cannot skip the specificity of Israel, where there live,

not always in peace, two nations. Some clubs are also divided to Arab and Jewish. It sometimes produces tensions, but at the same time some teams can become integrative platforms (like Maccabi Haifa or special programs for young people). It is worth observing different processes on the Israeli stadiums and conduct research. There are still many undiscovered topics which can be interesting for sociologists, historians and political scientists. The example of "Forever Pure" shows that the subject can also be inspirational for journalists and directors.

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