

The Politicization of Sports: The Status of Boycotting



by Howard Rotberg

As the winter Olympics are now here, we know that there has been some support for actions against the Chinese hosts, due to their breaches of civil rights and international misconduct. Many nations have sent their athletes, but not their diplomats.

Certain countries governed by leftists and/or Islamists like to take actions against Israeli athletes as part of their BDS (Boycott Divestment Sanction) activities against Israel. Others believe that sports can promote Respect and Sportsmanship to override the vile Boycotting and Shunning of the BDS movement. Most who are knowledgeable about the threats to Israel understand that BDS is a real threat. This essay examines the issues about boycotting countries or athletes when it comes to sports.

Let's start with the situation of Israel and the BDS movement against it. There is a great organization, called the Maccabee Task Force (<https://www.maccabeetaskforce.org/>, now working to counter BDS at universities and elsewhere, and its website says:

"The Maccabee Task Force was created in 2015 to combat the

disturbing spread of anti-Semitism on America's college campuses. We believe the BDS movement is at the forefront of this troubling trend. We maintain that BDS is an anti-Semitic movement that crosses the line from legitimate criticism of Israel into the dangerous demonization of Israel and its supporters. We are determined to help students combat this hate by bringing them the strategies and resources they need to tell the truth about Israel."

"The (BDS) movement takes much of its inspiration and rhetoric from the successful boycotts of the 1980's and early 1990's that forced the South African government to abandon its system of racial apartheid. This is why the BDS movement tries so hard – despite so many facts to the contrary – to draw a parallel between Israel and South Africa.

A visit to the BDS website (www.BDSmovement.net) quickly reveals that BDS has far a more radical goal: eliminating Israel as a Jewish state. This is not an exaggeration. This is something BDS leaders readily admit.¹

"The problem with the BDS movement is not that it criticizes Israel. The problem with the BDS movement is that it criticizes only Israel. BDS insists on blaming the entire conflict on only one side – Israel. Such simplistic scapegoating won't bring peace; it will only fuel extremism."

The Cambridge Dictionary defines "sportsmanlike" as:

[behaving](#) in a way that is [fair](#) and [shows respect](#) towards the other [players](#) when [playing sport](#)

Likewise, a "sport" can be defined as "a person who behaves in a good or specified way in response to teasing, defeat, or a similarly trying situation".

Shouldn't our culture, when directed towards our opponents, have a large element of sportsmanship, behaving in a way that

is fair and shows respect? Or is every cultural battle a “fight to the finish” that is, to a complete victory in making your enemy into a non-person with beliefs that are so evil they must be censored and whose athletes are so evil that they should be shunned? And once shunning is successful, what comes next?

Hillary Clinton, formerly an American Secretary of State claims that “respect” should be given to all, even one’s *enemies*. However Oxford Dictionary defines “respect” as “a feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities or achievements” I don’t think we should respect Iran or other genocidal countries. However, we can respect individual athletes for their athletic prowess.

Should athletes and their governing bodies from liberal democracies consider boycotting Olympic games held in countries that are guilty of genocide or other serious human rights issues? That is a consideration with respect to the winter Olympics in China. A number of western democracies are sending their athletes but not their diplomats in a so-called “diplomatic boycott”.

In the past, dozens of countries, led by the U.S., withheld their athletes from the 1980 Moscow Olympics. to protest the Russian invasion of Afghanistan: then 13 other governments led by Russian declined to send their athletes to the following Summer Olympics in Los Angeles—claiming that they would not be safe.

On the other hand there were some Olympics that are noted for *not* being boycotted. We recall the West’s failure to boycott or use some other sanctions against the Nazis at the Berlin Summer Olympics of 1936. By the time of those Olympics, Hitler had made clear his plans for a genocide of the Jews and others, even if the athletes themselves did not understand that.

Big Tech is and big media are ramping up censorship against Israel at the very time that the Abraham Accords shows the way to behave for mutual benefits.

As to sportsmanship, Iran and some other Muslim nations use sports as a propaganda “club” against the Israelis whom they will never respect,

However, just as the BDS (Boycott Divestment Sanction) movement has made gains among university faculty and students, it has been increasingly failing in the realm of sports. This gives some hope that President Trump’s Abraham Accords will find fertile ground for increasing cultural and sporting exchange between Israel and the Sunni Muslim nations that have accepted the accords. We hope that the Palestinians will understand that most Arabs, including those living in Israel now accept sportsmanship and that the Palestinian Jew-hatred, in the field of sports, as in the field of politics, mostly hurts their own people. *Israel Hayom* has recently reported the results of a poll that 93% of Palestinians in East Jerusalem prefer to live under Israeli sovereignty rather than be governed by the Palestinian Authority

The main sports which have historically been involved in anti-Israel shunning are judo, chess and football (soccer). See the following site for a history of anti-Israel sports boycotts:

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boycotts_of_Israel_in_sports) of historical shunning and one can see that the sports authorities in Arab countries are moving in the opposite direction from the leftists and Islamists who are the main movers of BDS. It seems that since 2017 the boycotts have been declining and the international sports authorities have less tolerance for anti-Israel actions in sport.

Supporters of the [Boycott Divestment Sanctions](#) (BDS) movement advocated and *failed* for Israel to be expelled or suspended from FIFA. On 24 August 2018, the President of the

[Palestinian Football Association](#) (PFA) [Jibril Rajoub](#) was fined CHF 20,000 (US\$20,333) and banned from FIFA matches for a year for inciting hatred and violence against an Argentinian team proposing to play a friendly match in Israel.

Supporters of the BDS movement tried and failed to have Israeli teams barred from the [2012 London Olympics](#) and the [2016 Rio Olympics](#). At the 2016 Rio Olympics, Egypt's [Islam El Shehaby](#) provoked outrage after refusing to shake hands with Israeli judoka, [Or Sasson](#)™

Despite Israel's international political issues, a growing number of Arab athletes are joining domestic Israeli sports teams and the international teams, including the [Israel national football team](#). These include [Rifaat Turk](#), [Najwan Ghrayib](#), [Walid Badir](#), [Salim Toama](#), [Abbas Suan](#), amongst others. Another [Arab-Israeli](#), Johar Abu Lashin, born in [Nazareth](#), was an [IBO](#) Welterweight champion. It often seems that Arabs living outside the Middle East are more radical and more often demand boycotts than Arabs living or working in Israel.

In October 2017, when an Israeli [Tal Flicker](#) won gold in an international judo championship in the United Arab Emirates, officials refused to fly the Israeli flag and play the Israeli national anthem, instead playing the official music of the [International Judo Federation](#) (IJF) and flying the IJF's logo.

The UAE also banned Israeli athletes from wearing their country's symbols on uniforms, having to wear IJF uniforms. I have written about the importance of symbolism at:

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/25246>
and

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/25100>
and

<https://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/25092>

. I believe that when we identify an Islamist symbol, we must attack that symbol, to show that our symbols of liberal democracy are more hardy than their symbols of Jihad.

Accordingly we must be prepared to act against cultural symbols that eventually distort our culture and empower Islamists around the world. Attacking Israel in sporting events must be met by a refusal of sports people everywhere to go along.

In December 2017, seven Israelis were denied visas by Saudi Arabia to compete in an international chess tournament¹ In October 2018, the UAE reversed its position allowing the Israeli flag be displayed and anthem played when an Israeli judoka [Sagi Muki](#) won a gold medal.

On 24 May 2018, a team of international jurists, including Harvard Professor [Alan Dershowitz](#), took action against the exclusion of Israel's flag and anthem at sporting events in Arab countries. Said Professor Dershowitz;

"It starts with sports, but it won't end there. We won't allow the Jewish state to be treated like it's a second-class country."

In July 2018, the International Judo Federation canceled two grand slam judo events, in [Tunis](#) and [Abu Dhabi](#), because Israeli flags were not allowed to be raised. Also in July 2018, the [World Chess Federation](#) said it would ban Tunisia from hosting the international chess competition in 2019 if it did not grant a visa to Israeli contestants, including a seven-year-old Israeli girl champion.

On 18 January 2019, Israel called upon the [International Paralympic Committee](#) to move the [World Para Swimming Championships](#) scheduled for Malaysia in July 2019 because it has refused to let Israelis participate.¹ 10 days later, the IPC confirmed that due to Malaysia's actions regarding Israeli visas, the championships would be stripped from Malaysia and moved to another location. The IPC board said Malaysia "failed to provide the necessary guarantees that Israeli Para swimmers could participate, free from discrimination, and safely in the

Championships", including full compliance with the IPC protocols related to anthems and flags.

In March 2019, the Israeli national anthem was played in [Qatar](#) after Israeli gymnast [Alexander Shatilov](#) won the gold medal for the floor exercise during the [2019 FIG Artistic Gymnastics World Cup series](#). The anthem had previously been played in [Abu Dhabi](#) in October 2018, after Israeli judoka [Sagi Muki](#) won the gold medal in the Judo Grand Competition.

In August 2019, Iranian judoka [Saeid Mollaei](#) refused to withdraw from a match at the [2019 World Judo Championships](#) in Tokyo which would have required, had he won, to compete against an Israeli judoka Sagi Muki in the final. Though he lost, and so did not need to compete against the Israeli, Mollaei feared returning to his country and sought political asylum in Germany. Following the episode, the International Judo Federation (IJF) suspended Iran from competing in any future judo competition. Later on, Egyptian judoka [Mohamed Abdelaal](#) refused to shake hands with Israeli Sagi Moki in the same championship. In October 2019, two Iranian teenagers also refused to play Israelis in a chess tournament. On 17 November 2019, the Israeli national anthem was played and Israeli flag flown in Abu Dhabi when 17-year-old Alon Leviev took gold in the junior category at the Ju-jitsu World Championship. In December 2019, [Alireza Firouzja](#), the world's second-highest rated junior chess player, applied to renounce his Iranian citizenship over pressures on Iranian athletes to forego matches with Israeli competitor, the second Iranian sports figure in recent months to do so.

In early November 2019, the BDS movement sought the cancellation of a soccer match between the national teams of Argentina and Uruguay scheduled to be held in Tel Aviv, Israel¹. The match took place on the 19th of November.

In November 2020, the [International Chess Federation](#) (FIDE)

warned the Iranian Chess Federation (ICF) that it could be facing an imminent international ban for its continued refusal to allow Iranian chess players to compete against their Israeli equivalents.

In July 2021, Algerian judo athlete Fethi Nourine withdrew from the [2020 Tokyo Olympics](#) rather than face an Israeli competitor. The International Judo Federation (IJF) temporarily suspended Nourine and his coach

With BDS we must call out the boycotters and have enough self-confidence to argue based on the facts of Israel's history. Most important is our knowledge that with the Abraham Accords and the establishment of relations with Morocco, Bahrain, Sudan, and the UAE we have an evolving level of support from Islamic modernists and enemies of Iran's mischief in the Middle East. Accordingly, the best way to corrode support for BDS is to have the better Islamic authorities refuse to support it.

While I support symbolic actions against China, we should discuss whether more actions should be undertaken on the basis that China is now guilty of genocidal acts. If it has not yet reached the level of Nazi Germany then I would suggest that in addition to the diplomatic boycott, other countries should arrange for more embarrassing publicity against what China is doing with the Uyghurs, the Falun Gong, Hong Kong and the threats against Taiwan. Such publicity should accompany media coverage of the actual sporting events. However, that entails a level of media morality and journalistic integrity which seems to be lacking. Pressure should be applied to the media to report on more than the results in the competition.

We must remember that symbolism is often the whole point of hosting the Olympics; that symbolism is meant to increase the host countries prestige but also future trade and cultural exchanges, If we make it clear from the outset that coverage of the athletics can only be granted to news organizations

that cover the human rights abuses, perhaps we shall make clear to the world that sports depends on a certain level of respect and moral goodness with respect to other countries and a country's own athletes. When the Americans joined the Berlin Olympics of 1936, after much controversy, it was said by the proponents of such participation that it was an opportunity to embarrass the Nazi theory of Aryan superiority because the world's fastest man, American Jesse Owens, was a black man.

In fact the Americans botched the opportunity to demonstrate the superiority of the

Liberal democracies and show how Jews should be treated. After Owens won gold medals in his first three events, the final event for him was the 4 by 100 relay. Scheduled to run were two Jewish American athletes, Marty Glickman and Sam Stoller. When the coach, along with American Olympic Committee head Avery Brundage, decided to bench the two Jews and give Jesse Owens a chance at a fourth medal, Owens himself advocated for the Jewish runners. As Glickman recalled it, Owens said,

"Coach, I've won my 3 gold medals [the 100, the 200, and the long jump]. I'm tired. I've had it. Let Marty and Sam run, they deserve it," said Jesse. And coach Cromwell pointed his finger at him and said "You'll do as you're told."

And in those days, Black athletes did as they were told, and Jesse was quiet after that. But the Americans passed up a great opportunity to show that both Blacks and Jews could best the Aryan "supermen".

Perhaps the clearest example of how sports is trying to overcome anti-Israel bias and leftist/Islamist shunning of Israeli athletes is the story of the Olympics' dastardly behaviour at the 1972 Munich Summer Olympics and its belated corrective.

A moment of silence was held during the Tokyo Olympics opening ceremony Friday July 23rd for the Israeli athletes killed at the 1972 Munich games. This memorial some 49 years after the murders, was requested, but never given until now. It was in fact the first time those victims were formally honored at the global event.

The International Olympic Committee had many times turned down requests to hold a moment of silence to remember the massacre. Despite pleas from the victims' families and Jewish organizations, there was a strange reluctance to do so; for example, in 2012, then-IOC President Jacques Rogge even called the idea of honoring them "inappropriate."

I have written about the details of the horrible Munich games and the pitiful German and Olympic response to the murder of Israeli athletes in the Olympic village, the botched attempt by German authorities to free the Israeli hostages, and also about how the terrorists were made into heroes by Libya: "MUNICH 1972 AND 2016: The long history of German incompetence in the face of Islamist terrorism." – <https://archives.frontpagemag.com/fpm/munich-1972-and-2016-howard-rotberg/>

Sports authorities are facing numerous acts of "taking the knee" by Black athletes and their supporters, who seek to use such symbols to reflect the growing critical race theory movement in the West. These symbols, unfortunately, are not used, or understood, the same way by proponents. For example, do the acts express a moderate attempt for an end to racial discrimination or do they express a hatred of white males who supposedly fit in the group of "oppressors" in the world of "intersectionality"? As we see in the United States, acts of "equity" (special treatment for those asserting redress and compensation for racist acts many years ago) are replacing the traditional "equality of opportunity".

Two American Black athletes in 1968, wore black gloves and

stared downwards in a “Black Power” salute and were ejected from the Olympic site.

American sport fans and teams have tolerated politicization of sporting events by allowing sitting during the playing of the national anthem or taking the knee. There are rumors that certain National Football League teams will allow a special Black national anthem along with the American national anthem.

The American Black Lives Matter movement has led to the politicization of sport. BLM in the U.S. uses violent tactics, supports Palestinian terrorism, and has a Marxist ideology. It also is alleged that there is a rampant misuse of corporate donations (the Black woman who co-founded the movement apparently now has four houses) and thus is problematic as an American contribution to peaceful global sporting events.

John Branch, writing recently in *The New York Times*, gives some perspective on the problems below the surface of the parades, fancy buildings and culture of the Olympics:

“The Games are presented as apolitical, but this is impossible and untrue. The honor of holding them has faded; the Olympics strain to attract host cities, which are often left staggering in the aftermath. Climate change is shrinking the map for viable locations, especially for the Winter Games...

“More and more democratic countries are skeptical of the Olympics. Activist groups like Human Rights Watch and NolympicsLA have found voices and audiences”

Accordingly only nations and not political organizations should be allowed to participate in an associated video event where such nations can each present a 30 minute video on whatever topics they choose, but preferable to show their sports and culture and economies. Those who come to the Olympics for sport can choose whether or not they want to watch the videos and those who want sports to be independent of politics can choose not to watch the videos.

The current winter games, held in an increasingly aggressive and tyrannical China, with its contempt for liberal values and its threats against Taiwan, its oppression of Muslims and other minorities, its disrespect of international law concerning fishing rights of the Philippines, and its take-over of Hong Kong? In the face of political activism of the athletes, the IOC has struggled to adapt the long-standing Rule 50 of its Olympic Charter.

It states: "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas."

Obviously, adhering to Rule 50 would pose a problem since political, religious and racial propaganda are increasing quickly.

Black athletes, spoiled by the uncritical support internationally for Black Lives Matter didn't hesitate to voice their objections to Rule 50. In fact, there have been several amendments made in order to placate what is now seen as a powerful moral force, despite its lack of transparency and democracy and the fact that most athletes still want no symbolic acts on the podium or in general any acts of hate.

A consultation overseen by the athlete representative on the IOC's executive board, Olympic champion swimmer Kirsty Coventry of Zimbabwe, concluded athletes wanted the field of play and podiums protected. The process had talked mostly to athlete groups from officially recognized channels such as national teams and sports governing bodies. See the April 2021 conclusions of how to balance freedom of expression with the neutrality of support at <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/ioc-athletes-commission-s-recommendations-on-rule-50-and-athlete-expression-at-the-olympic-games>

As an example of the policy quagmire for the IOC, one IOC

concession was that athletes could wear apparel displaying words like “peace,” “respect,” “solidarity,” “inclusion” and “equality,” but slogans such as “Black Lives Matter” would not be accepted.

Another example, as stated by Jules Boykoff, author of the book *Power Games: A Political History of the Olympics*, argues at

<https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/olympics-are-political-ioc-ban-denies-reality-athletes-their-voice-ncna1117306> that the new IOC policy banning athletes’ activism enables the repression of dissent with a little wink to Beijing. It states, “Any protest or demonstration outside Olympic venues must obviously comply with local legislation wherever local law forbids such actions.” “In short” writes Boykoff, “the IOC provides a generous carve-out for its authoritarian hosts, an alibi for subjugation.”

On the first day of competition in Tokyo, the British and Chilean teams knelt before the opening games and were followed by the United States, Sweden and New Zealand players in later kickoffs. The Australia team posed with a flag of Australia’s indigenous people.

But the athletes’ commission had concluded Olympic competitors did not want distractions on their field of play.

The new guidance allows taking a knee or raising a fist in pre-game or pre-race introductions but not on medal ceremony podiums. The IOC will still discipline athletes who protest on the podium. And therein lies the solution to all the politicization of sport. There should be a pre-games event where all are welcome to make their political views known – but the events themselves should be free of any political actions, words or symbolism. For example, swimming’s FINA has said its athletes are prohibited on the pool deck from any gesture interpreted as protest. Respect for athletes and the concept of sport will require that all athletes be permitted

to participate without shunning and boycotting; however, freedom of expression should be permitted in an associated event as long as that event allows full and complete presentations for the sake of truth, and nations are directed to display their cultural and sports achievements and not their hatreds.

Howard Rotberg is the author of four books, including *The Second Catastrophe: A Novel About a Book and its Author*, *Tolerism: The ideology Revealed*, and most recently *The Ideological Path to Submission... and what we can do about it*. He writes for Israel National News, Frontpage Magazine and New English Review, among others. He is president of Mantua Books.