

## ***The Impact of Athletic Brands on Arab Youth Perceptions of Israel: A Review of Sports Diplomacy in Social Science***

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### **Keywords**

*Athletic  
Brand; Arab  
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Conflict;  
Normalization  
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Boycott.*

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### **Abstract**

*This research offers an Arab view point from the academic fieldwork on the nexus between sports diplomacy and social science. The research examines the impact of sports diplomacy through athletic brands on youth perceptions of Israel in the Arab region. 113 Arab students in four Egyptian and Palestinian Universities were surveyed, through mixed-methods research directed by thematic analysis to examine students' perceptions of Israel based on the political stance of Arab athletes competing against Israeli athletes at sports mega events. Responses indicate that Arab athletes' conduct towards Israeli counterparts in the realm of sports diplomacy had a significant impact on students' perspectives, predominantly fostering unfavorable impressions of Israel. According to the research, there is a gap between youth opinions and the policies of the respective governments. The research concludes that sports boycott is effective in resisting occupation, and that sports and politics are indivisible as the animosity embedded in the Arab-Israeli conflict reflected on respondents' preferences and emphasized collective national identity among students in the four universities, that linked competition with Israeli athletes to the perception of Israel as enemy. Therefore, the idea of sports normalization appears to be a myth.*

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## تأثير العلامات التجارية الرياضية على تصور الشباب العربي لإسرائيل: دراسة في العلاقة بين الدبلوماسية الرياضية والعلوم الاجتماعية

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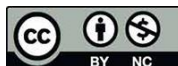
الكلمات المفتاحية	الملخص
العلامة التجارية الرياضية؛ تصور الشباب العربي؛ الصراع العربي الإسرائيلي؛ التطبيع؛ المقاطعة الرياضية.	تتناول هذه الدراسة العلاقة بين الدبلوماسية الرياضية والعلوم الاجتماعية من خلال دراسة تأثير العلامات التجارية الرياضية على تصورات الشباب العربي عن إسرائيل. تم استطلاع آراء 113 طالبا عربيا في الجامعات المصرية والفلسطينية، من خلال منهج مختلط يتضمن تحليلا كميا ونوعيا لاستطلاع آراء الطلاب في أربع جامعات عن إسرائيل بناء على الموقف السياسي للرياضيين العرب الذين يتنافسون ضد رياضيين إسرائيليين في المنافسات الرياضية الدولية. تشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن سلوك الرياضيين العرب تجاه نظرائهم الإسرائيليين في مجال الدبلوماسية الرياضية له تأثير كبير على تصورات الطلاب، غالبا ما يعزز الانطباعات السلبية عن إسرائيل. ومن ثم تظهر الدراسة أن هناك فجوة بين آراء الشباب والسياسات الحكومية ذات الصلة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن المقاطعة الرياضية فعالة في مقاومة الاحتلال، وأنه لا يمكن الفصل بين الرياضة والسياسة، إذ انعكس العداء المتأصل في الصراع العربي الإسرائيلي على تفضيلات المشاركين من الطلاب في الجامعات الأربع وتأكيدهم على الهوية الوطنية الجماعية التي ربطت بين المنافسة الرياضية مع رياضيين إسرائيليين وتصورات الطلبة حول إسرائيل باعتبارها عدو، بما يؤكد أن فكرة التطبيع الرياضي تبدو غير واقعية.

## **1- Introduction:**

*The intersection between social science and sports has been debated in various studies and instilled a wide spectrum of arguments and views of whether sports should be used as a tool to impose social normalization within the broader framework of politics. While some scholars may argue that sports and politics should not blend, this paper contends that the sport phenomena is a reflection of the paradoxes of politics. In the context of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, different perspectives have been offered on the old-new question of whether sports can connect Arabs and Israelis in spite of the perpetual political conflict between them. Some studies (Galily and Shimon, 2013), have focused on the power of sports to promote peace and coexistence between the Arab people and Israel and to mend what politics has destroyed. Other studies (Dart, 2017) have examined the intersection between sports and politics through the prism of racism and nationalism in which sports boycotts are depicted as signs of promoting anti-Semitism and hatred toward Israel. Both of these studies tend to advocate international sporting norms that support the existence and survival of Israel. Conversely, other studies have discussed sports as a medium for promoting Palestinian national pride and punishing apartheid regimes as in the case of Israel and South Africa, with the latter having been subjected to a large number of international boycotts including sport (Darweish and Rigby, 2018; Rose and Rose, 2002). These studies tend to advocate international sporting norms that oppose oppressive apartheid regimes.*

*One major limitation however, is the shortage of academic literature that concerns the impact of sports and athletic brands on young people's perceptions of Israel in the Arab region. Arab athletes have consistently boycotted games with Israeli Jews in international sports mega events (SMEs) as a means of expressing solidarity with the Palestinians and combating sport normalization. Among numerous examples, Algerian Judoka athlete Fethi Nourine at Tokyo 2020 Olympics, and Kuwaiti Jiu-Jitsu athlete Abdullah Al-Anjari at the 2019 all-Americas Jiu-Jitsu Tournament refused to compete against Israeli athletes to condemn Israel's occupation of Palestine, while others have in contrast competed against Israeli athletes in mega events, such as, Egyptian taekwondo athlete Seif Eissa at the Luxemburg Open 2019, and Saudi Judoka athlete Tahani Al-Qahtani at Tokyo 2020 Olympics (Panja, 2021; State Information Service, 2019; the New Arab, 2019; Sachkhabrain, 2021). This disparity among the Arab athletes toward Israel in the sports field has prompted this researcher to rethink the impact of famous Arab athletes' imagery competing against Israeli athletes in the sports medium on the way Arab youth view Israel.*

*The research focuses on the perception of Arab youth in Egyptian and Palestinian Universities. Both Egypt and Palestine have a history of perpetual conflict with Israel, as*



well as official relations facilitated by peace treaties. Despite the development of relations between Egypt and Israel to official peace since 1979, and official Egypt becoming the regional sponsor of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians during Mubarak years, nevertheless, relations on the popular level have not developed similarly between both sides (Stein, 1997). Furthermore, in Palestine, there has never been peace between the Palestinian people and the Israelis despite the signing of Oslo agreements between Palestinian leadership and Israel in the 1990s. Palestinian-Israeli Conflict perpetuated before, during and after the Oslo Peace Process which lasted from 1991 to 2000 (Shlaim, 2005). Literally, there is a perpetuated conflict between the Palestinians and the Israeli Jews everywhere in the Palestinian occupied territories in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and inside the green line<sup>1</sup>, which has garnered momentum with the surge of normalization waves in the Arab region between Arab governments and Israel in 2020 in various spheres, including sports (Krasna, 2021).

The purpose of this research is to examine students' perceptions of Israel among Egyptian and Palestinian university students, by examining the influence of famous Arab athletic brands and their stance from Israeli athletes in SMEs, on students' perceptions. For this purpose, the research survey's students' opinions in four Egyptian and Palestinian Universities through quantitative and qualitative analysis directed by thematic analysis, to gain a deeper understanding of students' views regarding their perception of Israel. This analysis begins by outlining the literature on the delicate nature of sports diplomacy as a field of study in social sciences, highlighting the impact of athletic brands on youth perceptions, and the use of sports as a medium for political action in the context of Arab-Israeli conflict. The paper then pursues a mixed-method approach to examine the research purpose and analyse the results.

## **2- Literature Review:**

### **2-1- Sport Diplomacy in Social Sciences :**

Sport has been mainly studied in literature as an empirical field in which social theorists use assumptions to confirm or challenge respective theories. In examining the different debates on the nexus between sports and social sciences, it is therefore noticeable how social sciences employ sports not only as a major phenomenon embodied in the human society such as religion, identity and power, but rather as a function that moves between social structures and the social actors who use and guarantee them meaning and context (Loy and Booth, 2000, 14-16). In social sciences, the sporting phenomenon has a powerful impact on peoples' perceptions because sport has developed from being a tool

<sup>1</sup> According to the United Nations high commissioner for human rights, the green line is referred to as the armistice borders with neighboring States (1948 –49), separating Israel-controlled territory from the other areas of Palestine (Jerusalem, West Bank & Gaza Strip). See: <https://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cerd/docs/ngos/jointngo3.pdf>



*for mere entertainment to an institutionalized global phenomenon (Stevenson, 1976). This has produced a complex interconnectivity among global actors, which requires a careful consideration of the impact of sports on the masses around the world, which is no longer just a global village as heralded by (McLuhan, 1962), but rather a hamlet where actors are situated in a complex interconnectivity through mass media and internet communications. Hence, the impact of sports diplomacy on younger generations needs more consideration due to its intersection with politics as a major domain of social sciences.*

*Murray and Pigman (2014) argue that the relationship between sports and politics has been relatively unexplored in the realm of theory and practice and thereby requires further examination to promote effective use by governments and international sporting bodies. Both these scholars claim that traditionally, sports have been employed by governments as a soft tool of diplomacy which can be used to promote their objectives. In this sense, SMEs organized under the umbrella of reputable international bodies such as the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the International Federation of Football Association (FIFA) can be viewed as a political force that has a variety of purposes and roles including nation branding, portraying humanity, and fostering understanding among diverse cultures. Other research suggests that sports can be employed as a tool for fostering peace; as a means for normalization, translated in the academic literature into notions such as “co-existence”, “peace”, and “reconciliation” (Mickelsson and Hansso, 2021; Leitner et al. 2012; Galily and Shimon, 2013; Khalid, 2020).*

*Nevertheless, critical literature has suggested that SMEs are show business and should not be linked to the pursuit of reputable international sports bodies such as the IOC and FIFA. Hoberman, for example argues that the rhetoric that highlights the role of sports in peace-promoting is a dominant myth in international media coverage, because there is no evidence to support such claim and because these international bodies have not met the requirements for promoting peace (Hoberman, 2011). It is further distressing to observe how politics pervades sports mega events and elite sports bodies as the IOC. The history of the Olympic Games is inundated with bans and boycotts. In the past, the Olympic Games under the IOC were used as a medium to punish governments. For example, from the 1964 Olympics until the 1988 Olympics, the IOC banned South Africa from participating in the Olympic Games as part of sport boycott of apartheid South Africa due to its government's racial discrimination policy against the majority of its black population and the ban lasted until the 1988 Olympics (Nauright, 1997, 136-138; MacLean, 2014). Nevertheless, the IOC surprisingly did not ban New Zealand from participating in the 1976 Olympics in spite of the visit of the New Zealand rugby team to*

South Africa, which was suspended at the time by the IOC from participating in the Olympics (Lenskyj, 2014, 61–73).

Sports boycott has been effectively employed to punish apartheid states from participating in mega events as in the case of South Africa, nevertheless, in the case of apartheid Israel, persistent attempts to bar Israel from participating in mega events have been to no avail. Black (1999, 213-231) argues that sport boycotts are an effective tool that contributed to ending apartheid regime in South Africa by inflicting significant socio-psychological pain, undermining the legitimacy of the South African racial order, and strengthening new behavioral norms. Nevertheless, in the Israeli context sport boycott is depicted as act of agitating conflict, and it is the Arab side that is primarily blamed and punished for rejecting interaction with Israeli athletes in SMEs.

### **2-2-The impact of Athletic Brands on Perception:**

The concept of the athletic brand refers to the distinctive authenticity of the athletes; the values, behavior, actions, and virtues that guide their pursuit of a particular goal. Some studies have examined the impact of professional athletic brands on youngsters and students (Taniyev and Gordon, 2022), and other studies have focused on the social and educational value of sport (Piccolo, 2020, 1-47). Reid (2017) argues that athletes, heroes, and the song culture that celebrated them in ancient Greece were all part of a cultural conspiracy to elevate virtue by reconnecting communities to their heroic past. Other studies have paid more attention to understanding the impact on identity and career by studying the patterns of role model selection by adolescent student-athletes and how these role models have shaped self-construction (Ronkainen et al., 2019).

Furthermore, Taniyev and Gordon (2022) have examined how athletes are perceived by sport consumers as role models, and found that these four common athletic themes impacted consumers the most: personal attributes, community impact, idealized parental figure and exemplar for other athletes. Athletes are public figures, whose actions have a significant impact on young people's perceptions, who consider them role models (Arai et al., 2014). In light of the mainstream attention Arab athletes have received among young people, it becomes critical to examine the pursuit of Arab athletic brands toward Israel in the sporting sphere and its impact on the perceptions of Israel among emerging Arab generations, especially in the wider context of Arab regimes seeking to normalize relations with Israel in political, cultural, commercial, technological and sporting fields (Bahrain News Agency, 2020).

### **2-3- Sports as a medium for political action in the context of Arab-Israeli conflict:**

Not surprisingly, the medium of sports has been used by Arab athletic brands to promote the Palestinian question, especially after the unprecedented wave of Arab governments that have normalized relations with Israel in 2020 including UAE, Bahrain,





*Sudan, Morocco. Furthermore, Arab-Israeli sports normalization accelerated in recent years with the participation of Israeli athletes in Arab sporting events as in UAE 2018, 2019, 2020, and in Saudi Arabia in 2022 (Times of Israel, 2020; The New Arab, 2022), and the presence of UAE and Bahrain in sporting events in Israel (Sawafta, 2018). Sport normalization between Arab athletes and Israeli athletes in the name of “co-existence, friendship, peace” as argued by (Leitner et al. 2012; Galily and Shimon, 2013), may impact the perception of the younger Arab masses who perceive athletes as heroes and role models worth imitating. Hence, the research draws particular attention to the nexus between the pursuit of famous Arab athletic brands toward Israeli athletes in SME’s and the perception of the younger Arab generations.*

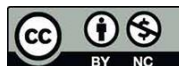
*According to literature on the Israeli sport industry, sports can bridge barriers between Israelis and Arabs-- something the Israeli side claims as possible. For example, under the scheme of “Friendship Games”, Leitner et al. (2012) and Galily and Shimon (2013) have argued that sports friendship programs can promote peace in the Middle East region. Furthermore, Sorek (2003) has claimed that Israel has used sport to unite people and break down barriers, and Arabs have used sport to promote Palestinian national pride, resulting in conflict and differences in interests.*

*This research attempts to fill the void in scholarly literature regarding the influence of sports and athletic brands on Arab youth perceptions of Israel in the Arab region, by presenting an Arab viewpoint.*

### **3- Methodology:**

*The research employs a mixed-methods approach, allowing for the incorporation of quantitative and qualitative elements directed by thematic analysis. This approach facilitates effective investigation of the research purpose. The data were collected using a structured questionnaire that has been administered to a sample of students from a variety of academic disciplines in four public and private Universities in Egypt and Palestine to ensure diversity and integrity: Cairo University (Main public University), the British University in Egypt (BUE) (private University), the Arab American University in Ramallah in the West Bank (AAUP) (private University), and the University of Palestine in Gaza (UP) (private University). The purpose is to examine students' perceptions of Israel in Egyptian and Palestinian Universities, highlighting the influence of famous Arab athletic brands and their stance from Israeli athletes in SMEs, on students' perceptions. The questionnaire has been administered in English and Arabic to ensure fairness and consistency among respondents and to avoid limiting perception and communication.*

*The questionnaire consisted of a brief introduction initiating the students to the subject of the study and to the purpose of the questionnaire, followed by a group of questions that address the research purpose. Questions focused on relative themes*



*pertaining to sports diplomacy and athletic brands and were designed in a clear language and structure to facilitate understanding. Anonymity of the respondents has been preserved in order to encourage honesty and freedom of expression.*

### **3-1- Sample:**

*Participants in this survey were selected from a variety of disciplines to ensure diversity, including Political Science, Engineering, Media, Administrative Sciences and Law. The primary data underwent empirical analysis using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). The questionnaire has been administered to the students in the academic year 2022 – 2023 in undergraduate and postgraduate programs in the four universities with a total number of 113 respondents. The demographics of respondents are represented in the following breakdown:*

- Total number of respondents from the BUE: 31 students; composing about 27.5% of the sample study,*
- Total number of respondents from Cairo University: 33 students; accounting to about 29.2% of the sample study,*
- Total number of respondents from the AAUP in Ramallah: 18 students; composing about 15.9% of the sample study,*
- Total number of respondents from University of Palestine in Gaza: 31 students; composing about 27.4% of the sample study.*
- Students age groups spanned between 17 to 48 years ( $M= 24$ )<sup>2</sup> including both students at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels.*

### **4- Results and Discussion:**

*Research found that Arab athletic brands had a significant impact on students' perceptions of Israel. Sports diplomacy by Arab athletes toward Israeli athletes has had a reciprocal effect on students' views of Israel. Arab athletes who boycotted competition against Israeli athletes received the highest appreciation by students which indicated students' negative perception of Israel. Those who competed against Israeli athletes whether they won or lost, however, received the least appreciation from students. What is interesting is that students who endorsed competition against Israeli athletes did not necessarily consider it a form of recognition or normalization, given that the Arab athlete won, which still indicated they had negative perception of Israel.*

*The research participants were asked whether they watched sports media channels. According to the data presented in table 1, a minority of the respondents 7.1% expressed strong disagreement with regards to their viewership of sports media channels.*

<sup>2</sup> *M refers to the median, where the average age of respondents is 24 years.*



An additional 12.4% disagreed. 22.1% of the respondents said that they watched sports media channels sometimes. A majority of the respondents agreed that they watched sports media channels with 29.2% agreeing and 29.2% strongly agreeing. This finding is indicative of significant interest in sports among students, as it reveals that a small number of students lacked interest, while the majority of students had a keen interest in sports.

**Table N°1**

***Students' consumption of sports media channels***

	<i>Frequency (f)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	8	7.1
<b>Disagree</b>	14	12.4
<b>Sometimes</b>	25	22.1
<b>Agree</b>	33	29.2
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	33	29.2
<b>Total</b>	113	100

**Source:** Table by the author

The researcher asked the participants whether they considered sports diplomacy as an effective tool in nation branding. As demonstrated in table 2, 4.4% strongly disagreed and 13.3% disagreed respectively that sports diplomacy was effective in nation branding. 9.7% of the respondents answered that sports diplomacy can be effective in nation branding sometimes, while 25.7% agreed and 46.9% strongly agreed respectively that they perceived sports diplomacy as an effective tool in nation branding. These results are indicative of students' awareness of the correlation between sports and politics, as more than half of the respondents; 72.6% perceived favorably the effectiveness of the use of sports diplomacy as a medium for nation branding.

**Table N°2**

***Students' perception of sports diplomacy in nation branding***

	<i>Frequency (f)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	5	4.4
<b>Disagree</b>	15	13.3
<b>Sometimes</b>	11	9.7
<b>Agree</b>	29	25.7
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	53	46.9
<b>Total</b>	113	100

**Source:** Table by the author



The research participants were asked if they considered sports boycott as an effective tool in resisting Israeli occupation. The majority of responses reflected a consensus among students that sports boycott is effective in resisting Israeli occupation. A minority of the respondents 3.5% strongly disagreed and 2.7% disagreed respectively that sports boycott can be effective in resisting Israeli occupation. 18.6% were moderate, while 32.7% and 42.5% agreed and strongly agreed that sports boycott is effective in resisting Israeli occupation, respectively. Results are shown in table 3. This means that the majority of respondents 75.2% disagreed to sports competition against Israeli athletes, which is indicative of students' rejection of sports normalization with Israel, compared to 6.2% who thought that sports boycott was not effective in resisting occupation.

**Table N°3**

***Students' perception of sports boycott in resisting occupation***

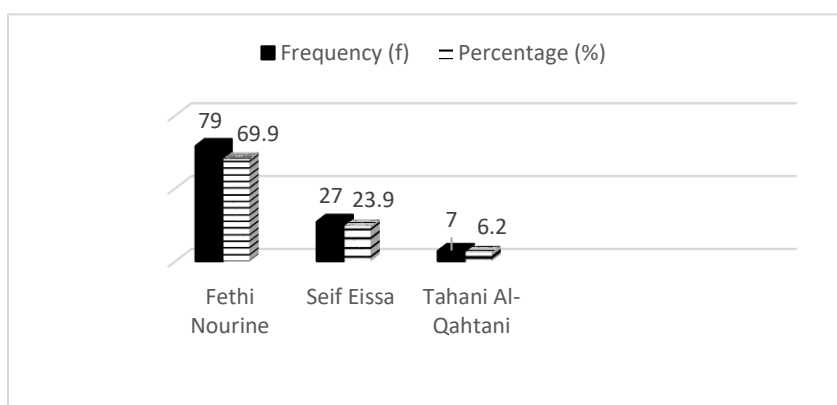
	<b>Frequency (f)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	4	3.5
<b>Disagree</b>	3	2.7
<b>Moderate</b>	21	18.6
<b>Agree</b>	37	32.7
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	48	42.5
<b>Total</b>	113	100

**Source:** Table by the author

Additionally, students were presented with three different athletic brand cases and have subsequently been asked to choose the athlete they supported the most, providing justification for their preferences. In the first athletic brand case, Egyptian Taekwondo national team athlete Seif Eissa competed against an Israeli athlete at Luxemburg Open 2019 in the semi-final according to the (State Information Service, 2019) and won. Eissa later posted his victory on social media citing a Quranic verse. In the second athletic brand case, Algerian Judoka athlete Fethi Nourine, boycotted the match with an Israeli athlete at Tokyo Olympics 2020 and has been suspended by the International Judo Federation (IJF) for withdrawing from the Olympics. Nourine said that despite his efforts to reach the Olympics, the Palestinian cause is more important than the Olympics (Panja, 2021; Dalloul, 2021). In the third athletic brand case, Saudi Judoka athlete Tahani Al-Qahtani competed against an Israeli athlete at Tokyo Olympics 2020 and lost. Al-Qahtani said it was a normal match (Sachkhabrain, 2021; Al-Monitor, 2021), and Israel praised Al-Qahtani for refusing to boycott the match, suggesting the move promotes peace and coexistence between Israelis and Arabs (Spiro, 2021).

Most students when reporting on their preferred athletic brand strongly supported the actions of Fethi Nourine. This is confirmed upon examining the frequencies and their valid percentages as shown in figure 1; 69.9% of the respondents expressed their support for Fethi Nourine who boycotted the match with an Israeli athlete, while 23.9% of the respondents supported Seif Eissa who competed against an Israeli athlete and won, and 6.2% supported Tahani Al-Qahtani who competed against an Israeli athlete and lost.

**Figure N°1**  
**Students' preferred athletic brand**



**Source:** Table by the author

A closer look at the breakdown of responses in figures and percentages per university, shows students' athletic brand preferences in the four Universities as indicated in table 4. As evident, Fethi Nourine scored the highest across the four universities, followed by Seif Eissa, and Tahani Al-Qahtani sequentially. Noticeably, none of the participants at the University of Palestine endorsed Al-Qahtani, whereas some at the other three universities endorsed the Saudi athlete.

**Table N°4**  
**Students' preferred athletic brand by university**

University	Frequency (f) & Percentage (%)	Athletic Brand		
		Fethi Nourine	Seif Eissa	Tahani Al-Qahtani
Cairo University	f	24	8	1
	%	21.2	7.1	0.9
BUE	f	23	6	2
	%	20.4	5.3	1.8
AAUP	f	14	0	4
	%	12.4	0	3
UP Gaza	f	18	13	0
	%	15.9	11.5	0
Total	f	79	27	7
	%	69.9	23.9	6.2

Source: Table by the author

*The elaboration provided by the respondents, unlocks the explanation to why respondents chose their preferred athletic brands, which revealed an established common view that Fethi Nourine is the preferred athlete among most students and that Al-Qahtani is the least preferred, while opinions varied regarding Seif Eissa. The students were mostly responsive; all 113 participants provided their responses accompanied by feedback that justifies their preferences, except 3 participants who provided their responses without feedback. All students provided their feedback in English, except 6 participants who provided their feedback in Arabic. Arabic responses were translated to English, for the purpose of the research. Analysis of the responses has been guided by thematic analysis of data, looking for patterns to determine themes and identify their underlying meaning, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the opinions of the sample study where respondents might have different opinions. Driven by the research aim, thematic analysis emphasized three important athletic themes among respondents: personal merits which refers to the athletes' personality traits and values, which subsequently dictated their actions, athletic policy which refers to the sports policy endorsed by the athletes when facing Israeli opponents, and political acumen which refers to the athletes' political consciousness in connection to their athletic policy:*

– **Personal merits:**

*Respondents' comments primarily commended the athletes' sense of belonging, which subsequently dictated their stance. To clarify, students who chose Fethi Nourine, particularly referred to the sense of belonging of the athlete in defending the Palestinian question and his audacity in risking the consequences incurred, both of which are representatives of the personal merits of the athlete that had substantial impact on his action. Correspondingly, as indicated throughout the responses, the athlete's sense of belonging, risking penalty contributed to raising awareness among the international community during the Olympic Games. From the students' perspectives, reminding the international community of the Palestinian plight and his devotion to the Palestinian cause were the athlete's defining value merits that captured respondents' attention despite any prospective penalties he might incur.*

*Other respondents had different opinions by choosing Seif Eissa, highlighting the sense of belonging of the athlete, his ability and self-confidence in defying the opponent and his prudence. From the responses it can be inferred that respondents in essence advocated confrontation and participation as a sign of strength and defiance rather than withdrawal which may indicate weakness or inability, yet this is essentially linked to the athlete's primary purpose which is winning to raise Arab dignity. Fewer respondents who chose Seif Eissa highlighted he acted prudently in order to avoid possible penalties.*

*Intriguingly, some respondents selected Al-Qahtani, and based their opinion on her pragmatic behavior. From the students' perspectives, regardless of the opponents' nationality and Al-Qahtani's defeat, the Saudi athlete played a normal match without much regard to political sensitivities, which is what the students regarded as pragmatic. Some respondents commended Al-Qahtani's pragmatism as it countered the Israeli perspective that might have expected boycott, so she competed against a normal opponent accepting either victory or loss.*

– **Athletic policy:**

*Sports boycott policy resonated with the common view among respondents. In their feedback, respondents endorsed Fethi Nourine's boycott policy, perceiving it as right and appropriate to resist Israel attempts to impose itself in sports mega events in the name of coexistence. In the same vein, respondents also made notion to the linkage between athletic policy, and the stance of the Arab masses. From students' perspectives, sports boycott represents the stance of the Arab Masses who reject normalization and endorse boycott against Israeli athletes in sports mega events in order to avoid giving Israel the*

opportunity to brand its image. The students' responses revealed their support to Nourine's boycott policy as a symbol that represents the position of the Arab masses, hence, the athlete's strive to direct attention to the idea that regardless of a match outcome, Israel benefits the most from sports competition with the Arab side to propagate normalization and hence boycott becomes critical, appealed to most respondents.

Competing and winning has been the athletic policy endorsed by students who did not necessarily perceive sports competition with the Israeli athlete as a sign of recognition of or normalization with Israel. Interestingly however, analysing students' feedback indicated that this is conditional on winning. Respondents made a particular connection to the result of the match and they endorsed Seif Eissa as he competed and won. Had he lost, respondents might have had different preferences.

Fewer respondents endorsed competing despite losing to the Israeli athlete. None of the respondents however, elaborated thoroughly on their preferences, by providing justification as to why they endorsed competing despite losing to the Israeli athlete.

– **Political acumen:**

By analysing students' feedback, to further understand how far athletic policy is connected to political consciousness, respondents highlighted the athletes' political awareness which reflected on their pursuit. According to the students, Fethi Nourine's awareness of the rooted enmity between Israel and the Arab people due to the prolonged conflict, prompted the athlete to reject competing with the Israeli athlete, which resonated with respondents and was apprehended by the majority of the students. Additionally, respondents' preferences of Nourine are connected to the political message portrayed by the Algerian athlete in the sports medium. Responses reflected the strong correlation between sports and politics, where recurring responses advocated the athlete's acumen in cutting off opportunity for Israel to cement normalization and his gesture using the event to focus attention on the Palestinian issue and undermine Israeli legitimacy. From the students' perspectives, Fethi Nourine's stance was the most logical as it provided a window of opportunity to stress on the idea of undermining Israel legitimacy in the sports medium where Israel consistently sought sports normalization with Arab athletes to break its popular isolation in the Arab region.

Noticeably, respondents who chose Seif Eissa as their preferred athlete, endorsed the athlete's standing as a means of defiance that mimic the political conflict but, in the playfield. The respondents' perception indicates that that Eissa's acceptance to compete with the Israeli athlete instead of boycotting was to portray that conflict is present in sports





as it is in politics, hence, by winning he delivered an indirect message that highlighted Arab pride and exposed Israeli weakness. Remarkably, only one student commended Tahani Al-Qahtani for her political consciousness. The respondent's perception indicates that Al-Qahtani did not engage in political matters, knowing that politics is administered by regimes, not by athletes who represent their nations abroad.

### **6-Conclusion:**

This research revealed how the views of young Arab students in Egyptian and Palestinian universities towards Israel might be shaped by the actions of Arab athletes towards their Israeli counterparts at international competitions. According to the analysis, Arab athletic brands greatly influenced how students viewed Israel. The actions of Arab athletes towards their Israeli counterparts in the field of sports diplomacy had a reciprocal influence on students' perceptions, which mostly held negative views of Israel. Since athletes are perceived by sport consumers as role models, their actions have a significant impact on young people's perceptions (Arai et al., 2014; Taniyev and Gordon, 2022). In students' responses for instance the terms "my hero", "my role model" and "my idol" were reiterated among the students, which reflected their support to Fethi Nourine. Arab athletes who boycotted competitions received the most appreciation, which indicated the negative perception students had of Israel, whereas Arab athletes who competed against Israeli athletes, no matter the outcome, were least appreciated. The analysis emphasized the following findings:

- Sports boycott is effective as it undermines Israel's international standing, and its long-sought efforts to propagate a peaceful outlook using sports as a medium to break its popular isolation in the Arab region.

- Particular disparities regarded sports boycott ineffective. Interestingly, students' elaboration in the qualitative section, indicated that despite rejection of sports boycott, some students did not necessarily view competition against Israeli athletes as a means of recognition or normalization.

- Sports and politics are inseparable as the enmity embedded in the Arab-Israeli conflict reflected on respondents' preferences of the athletic brands and the nationalist discourse they used in providing their feedback. Sport can sometimes channel, release, and even trigger complex and powerful nationalist sentiments (Allison, 2000, 54). Respondents in the four universities mostly expressed similar opinions regarding the perception of Israel as enemy.

In conclusion, students' feedback emphasized collective national identity (Allison, 2000, 51), that linked competition with Israeli athletes to the perception of Israel as enemy. Hence, the findings emphasize that sports normalization is a myth. Furthermore, the research is useful as it provides insight to how youth perceptions align with or vary from



the message of the governments. Results of the research reveal a gap between students' opinions and government policies. While Egyptian and Palestinian governments continue to foster official ties with Israel, findings emphasized that Arab students in the four universities, showed more solidarity with Palestine and consistently reject normalization.

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