

RED CARD TO JEW-HATRED: ANTISEMITISM IN SPORTS

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Sports as a Mirror and Catalyst for Change

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach anticipated the 2024 Paris Olympics to engage half of the world's population, demonstrating the unparalleled global influence of sports.¹ This vast reach makes sports a vital platform for addressing societal challenges, including one of humanity's oldest and most persistent hatreds: antisemitism. However, for sports to serve as a model for other domains it must confront and resolve its own challenge of entrenched antisemitism. The 2023 EU Survey of Jewish People, conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, highlights the scale of the problem: 18 percent of offline encounters with antisemitism were linked to sports events, up from 11 percent in 2018.² This increase is especially noteworthy given that the survey was conducted before Hamas' attack on Israel on October 07, 2023, and the subsequent wars in Gaza and Lebanon.³ Since then, antisemitism has been surging globally, with Israel-related antisemitism at the forefront.⁴ This trend is evident within the sports world as well, as seen in the pogrom-like attacks on Israeli football fans in Amsterdam on November 07, 2024.⁵ In light of these dire developments, there is an urgent need for systemic changes within sports to foster inclusivity and help combat antisemitism in all of its forms and manifestations.

Case Study Football

Undoubtedly, football is one of the most popular sports in the world. Over 240 million people are estimated to be registered players, with fan participation being in the billions.⁶ Unfortunately, within the broader sports landscape, football is also a hotbed for antisemitism: In 2021, a study conducted by Makkabi Deutschland examined the specific risk factors increasing the likelihood of experiencing an antisemitic incident as a Makkabi athlete in Germany. Foot-

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sports as a Mirror and Catalyst for Change

Sports has the potential to drive societal change due to its global reach; however, it first must confront antisemitism within its own ranks to become a true model of inclusivity.

Case Study Football - Fighting Antisemitism at Elite vs. Amateur Levels

Football is a hotbed for antisemitism, with challenges at both the elite and amateur levels. At the elite level, the sport must set a strong example by upholding societal values. At the amateur level, greater engagement with local stakeholders like coaches and referees is essential to combat antisemitism.

Focus on Israeli Athletes - Boycott Demands and Security Risks

With boycott demands and targeted security threats, Israeli athletes face distinct challenges. Strong institutional measures and global pressure are needed to address this exclusion.

The Digital Sphere as an Amplifier of Antisemitism

The digital sphere, especially social media, has become a major platform for spreading antisemitism. It is crucial for sports organizations to enhance their monitoring systems, offer support for affected athletes, and implement educational initiatives to tackle digital hate.

ball players from Makkabi Deutschland were eighteen times more likely to experience an antisemitic incident compared to members of other Makkabi sports divisions.⁷ Further evidence of football's centrality emerged from a Europe-wide survey published in October 2024.⁸ In this survey, 69 percent of representatives of Jewish organizations deemed antisemitism in football as either a very big (54 percent) or fairly big (16 percent) problem.⁹ No other sport was seen as

having a similarly significant problem with antisemitism.¹⁰

It is important to note how antisemitism permeates all levels of the sport: In Great Britain, players as young as 7 years old have become victims.¹¹ By addressing these challenges head-on, football has the opportunity to set a powerful example. Its efforts could provide a valuable lessons for smaller-scale sports, equipping them with the tools to effectively fight antisemitism.

Fighting Antisemitism at Elite vs. Amateur Levels

Given football's global significance and the pervasive presence of antisemitism within the sport, a range of initiatives have been established to address the issue. To assess their effectiveness and identify key gaps that require urgent attention, it is crucial to distinguish between the elite and amateur levels, as each is shaped by unique dynamics and marked by significant resource disparities.

At the elite level, a recognition of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism by many top leagues and clubs is a commendable step which sets a strong precedent.¹² Indeed, it is imperative that the Spanish La Liga and the French Ligue 1 follow the example set by the English Premier League, the German Football League (DFL) and the Italian Serie A, so that all five of Europe's top football leagues adopt the definition.^{13/14/15}

Such a unified approach would not only send a powerful message of solidarity in the fight against antisemitism, but also reinforce the sport's dedication to inclusivity and fair play on the biggest stage. Institutionalisation creates commitment!

At the elite level, significant efforts are underway to address antisemitism within the fan scene, which European Jewish organizations and football stakeholders have identified as one of the most significant sources of the problem.¹⁶ The following cases can serve as best practice examples.

Combating Antisemitism within the Fan Scene: Best Practice Examples

The German Bundesliga club Borussia Dortmund provides an exemplary model regarding the combat against antisemitism within the fan scene, actively working to address Israel-related antisemitism specifically.¹⁷ Following Hamas' attack on Israel on October 07, 2023, the club offered workshops for fans on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹⁸ Additionally, relatives of the hostages were repeatedly invited to the stadium by both the club and fans.¹⁹

Likewise, Werder Bremen maintains an exemplary exchange with the Jewish community and follows similar approaches.²⁰ In tribute to Hersh Goldberg-Polin, an Israeli Werder fan murdered by Hamas while in captivity, Werder fans presented a moving choreography at a home match.²¹ A banner read: "Shalom, Salam, Peace – May your memory be a revolution, achi (Hebrew for 'my brother')."²²

These clubs demonstrate that a firm stance against antisemitism within fan communities is achievable when adequate resources are dedicated to sustained antisemitism-critical work. To expand the impact, clubs with the necessary resources should follow suit by appointing dedicated fan representatives alongside internal antisemitism commissioners. Such initiatives would foster a structured, long-term approach to addressing antisemitism within football.

Unfortunately, existing commendable efforts are frequently undermined by institutional failures. A recent example is the Union of European Football Associations' (UEFA) decision not to penalize Paris Saint-Germain after the club's supporters unveiled a gigantic antisemitic banner in the Champions League group match against Atlético Madrid on November 06, 2024.²³ Concretely, the displayed 50x20-meter "Free Palestine" banner featured imagery like a bloodstained Palestinian flag, a man resembling a terrorist with a bloodstained keffiyeh, Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock, as well as a map erasing the State of Israel, covering it with the pattern of a keffiyeh instead.²⁴ The banner was described by French Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau as "unacceptable" and by Yonathan

Arfi, President of the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions in France, as “scandalous.”²⁵

Article 16e of the 2024 UEFA Disciplinary Regulations prohibits “the use of gestures, words, objects or any other means to transmit a provocative message that is not fit for a sports event; particularly provocative messages that are of a political, ideological, religious or offensive nature”.²⁶ Nevertheless, UEFA chose not to take action as the banner was not deemed provocative.²⁷

This decision sets a dangerous precedent, normalizing antisemitism under the guise of freedom of expression and undermining broader efforts to tackle antisemitism. Accordingly, public and political pressure must be exerted on UEFA to ensure the enforcement of its own regulations, recognizing antisemitism in all of its forms and manifestations. Furthermore, national legal mechanisms, such as anti-incitement laws, should be invoked where UEFA fails to act.^{28/29}

That said, institutional blindness is not the sole challenge in elite football. Harmful individual actions by professional players have also contributed to the spread of antisemitism, particularly in the wake of Hamas’ attack on Israel on October 07, 2023. For example, in France, OGC Nice defender Youcef Atal reposted a video on October 08, 2023 in which a Palestinian preacher threatened Israel with a “black day”.³⁰ Similarly, in Germany, Noussair Mazraoui, then-defender of FC Bayern Munich, wished “victory” to the Palestinians mid-October 2023 on Instagram.³¹

Interestingly, these incidents were handled very differently. In France, Youcef Atal faced swift and decisive action: his club immediately suspended him, the league imposed a seven-match ban, and local authorities opened a legal probe.^{32/33} In addition, the International League Against Racism and Anti-Semitism and the Jewish Observatory brought civil actions against Atal.³⁴ Ultimately, a court in Nice found Atal guilty and handed him an 8-month suspended prison sentence as well as a 45,000-euro fine.³⁵ In stark contrast, Bayern Munich refrained from imposing any sanctions on Noussair Mazraoui.³⁶ These contrasting outcomes underscore the need for more consistent, decisive action in addressing antisemitism, even at the sport’s most elite level.

Exemplary allyship could play a pivotal role in fostering such action. In the case of Youcef Atal, the Mayor of Nice, Christian Estrosi, swiftly condemned the player’s post, denouncing its community-endangering nature, and actively working to engage and sensitize key institutions.³⁷ His proactive approach illustrates how local politicians can catalyze broader responses, ensuring that harmful actions are met with accountability.

Yet, there is also a pressing need for more people on the pitch to practice good allyship and take a decisive stance against antisemitism. Former UCLA star gymnast Nia Dennis, who vocally condemned antisemitism in the 2024 “New Year, New Voices” campaign, could serve as a role model.³⁸ Indeed, although multiple professional athletes also participated in the recent American “Time Out Against Hate” campaign, statements from active professional athletes specifically denouncing antisemitism remain too rare across sports globally.³⁹

Given professional athletes’ significant reach and influence, such statements have the potential to inspire change, particularly within the amateur sports community. While antisemitism often receives limited media attention and resources at this level, it remains a pervasive issue, particularly in football. In the 2021 study conducted by Makkabi Deutschland, more than two-thirds (68 percent) of its football players have experienced antisemitic incidents, with a majority (55 percent) facing such hostility multiple times.⁴⁰ Most recently, on November 07, 2024, youth players from TuS Makkabi Berlin were insulted, spat on, and eventually chased off the facilities with knives and sticks following a match.⁴¹ Berlin’s security services are currently investigating the case, illustrating how such incidents can expose gaps in prevention, response mechanisms, and the broader responsibilities of key actors within the sports ecosystem.⁴²

Indeed, there is an urgent need for more widespread prevention efforts at the grassroots level. Organizations like Makkabi Deutschland, through initiatives such as Zusammen1, are leading the way with antisemitism-critical training sessions.⁴³ However, scaling such initiatives to reach a sufficient number of players remains a hurdle, even with increased funding and better integration into football associations.

Therefore, key figures, such as coaches, referees, and club officials should be engaged at the local level as they play a critical role in shaping the culture of sports. Making antisemitism education a mandatory component of coaching, refereeing and sports management certifications is a vital step. Additionally, to ensure both prevention and deterrence, sports governing bodies must leverage existing laws to impose maximum penalties for antisemitic behavior.

A pertinent example of this approach can be seen in a youth match of TuS Makkabi Berlin in 2022.⁴⁴ During the game, an opposing player threatened to set an Israeli flag on fire and accused the referee of bribery.⁴⁵ Another player repeatedly gave the Nazi salute to Makkabi supporters.⁴⁶ The referee issued red cards to both players and filed a detailed report, resulting in the perpetrators being banned for two years, while their club was fined 1,500 euros.⁴⁷ This incident underscores the importance of sensitized referees, rapid intervention, and strong penalties in addressing antisemitism in sports, ensuring that such actions are met with appropriate consequences.

To summarize, the fight against antisemitism in football offers valuable lessons for other sports, especially in how challenges differ between the elite and amateur levels. At the elite level, significant resources have already been allocated to addressing antisemitism, for example within the fan scene. This investment has yielded progress, though inconsistencies remain—particularly in dealing with antisemitic actions by players.

At the grassroots level, the situation is even more complex, with limited resources and less media attention. Coaches, referees, and community leaders are essential in shaping the culture, but often lack the training and support to tackle antisemitism effectively. To drive lasting change across sports, local actors need the tools, training, and resources to foster inclusive environments and combat antisemitism. Additionally, deterrence through the use of existing laws and the imposition of stricter penalties is necessary to ensure that antisemitic behavior is met with appropriate consequences.

Focus Israel: Boycott Demands and Security Concerns

Within the broader conversation on antisemitism in sports, the distinct challenges faced by Israeli actors need to be considered. Since the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, Israeli athletes, teams, and sporting events have been targets of boycott campaigns by mostly Arab and Muslim nations, as well as international sporting associations.⁴⁸ For instance, during the 1958 World Cup qualifiers, the Israeli men's football team was drawn to play against Indonesia, Sudan, and Turkey, all of whom refused to compete against the Israeli team.⁴⁹ Leading up to the 2024 Paris Olympics, over 300 Palestinian sports teams called on the IOC to exclude Israel from the event, reflecting the central role sports play for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and its antisemitic agenda.^{50/51} In response to such longstanding, systemic antisemitism, strong institutional measures are vital as they also encourage individual stakeholders to take a clear stance.

After the expulsion of the Israeli Football Federation from the Asian Confederation in 1974, UEFA allowed Israeli national teams to compete within the European group in 1991.⁵² This model has been adopted across other sports such as basketball, handball, and judo.^{53/54/55} Yet while it has enabled Israeli athletes to compete at the international level, the underlying structural antisemitism must be confronted. Consistently denouncing discrimination against Israel on the global stage is crucial and will help apply pressure on international sports organizations and countries to adopt a firm, zero-tolerance stance toward antisemitism, including when it targets Israel and its athletes.

A powerful example of this zero-tolerance approach is the 10-year ban imposed on Algerian judoka Fethi Nourine and his coach after they withdrew from the 2020 Tokyo Olympics to avoid a potential bout against an Israeli.⁵⁶ The International Judo Federation determined that their actions violated the Olympic Charter.⁵⁷ This case demonstrates that the legal framework to address such incidents is often sufficient, though it requires consistent enforcement. That said, loopholes remain. For example, Iranian swimmer Mohammad Alirezai has repeatedly dropped out of com-

petitions against Israeli athletes, citing illness.⁵⁸ Even when it is not possible to hold athletes accountable, the facts must be highlighted publicly to emphasize the prevalence of such behavior.

Exemplary allyship among athletes is also crucial in combating Israel-related antisemitism. When Israeli tennis star Shahar Pe'er was denied a visa by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2009, the men's defending champion Andy Roddick withdrew from the competition.^{59/60} Additionally, the Women's Tennis Association imposed a record fine on the Dubai Championships and provided Pe'er with financial compensation and ranking points.⁶¹ In 2010, Pe'er returned to compete in Dubai, becoming the first Israeli female athlete to play in the UAE.⁶² While certainly representing progress, she needed to compete on the outside court for security reasons.⁶³

Security concerns remain a pressing issue, particularly in light of historical tragedies like the 1972 Munich massacre.⁶⁴ At the 2024 Paris Olympics, elite French police and gendarmerie, as well as the Israel Shin Bet security agency, were constantly monitoring all Israeli athletes.⁶⁵ The pogrom-like attacks on Israeli football fans in Amsterdam on November 07, 2024 also highlighted the need for stringent security for Israeli spectators.⁶⁶ Exacerbating these challenges is the ongoing war in Israel, which has left many national teams unable to compete at home.^{67/68} This situation demands a proactive response from international sports organizations, host nations, and allies to ensure the safety of Israeli athletes and fans abroad. In light of the recent ceasefire in Lebanon, there may also be an opportunity to reconsider the decision to deem Israel too unsafe to host competitions.

The Digital Sphere as an Amplifier of Antisemitism

As demonstrated by the antisemitic social media postings of professional football players Atal and Mazraoui, the digital sphere has, especially since Hamas' attack on Israel on October 07, 2023, become a powerful amplifier of antisemitism also within the sports world.^{69/70} Notably, while research has increasingly explored the effects of online abuse on athletes, the specific impact of antisemitism remains glaringly underexamined.⁷¹ For example, although World Ath-

letics monitored online abuse during the Paris 2024 Olympics for the fourth time, antisemitism was notably absent as a distinct category of analysis.⁷²

Yet, the effects of this targeted hate are already evident. American-Israeli wrestler Amit Elor reported "cruel messages" and "vicious antisemitism" after expressing support for Israel.⁷³ Similarly to German-Israeli football player Sharon Beck, Elor also received death threats online.^{74/75} These incidents demonstrate how antisemitism in the digital sphere has a tangible impact, with the blurred boundary between the online world and real life amplifying the mental health struggles, professional challenges, and personal safety risks faced by Jewish and Israeli athletes.

Addressing this growing issue requires a multifaceted approach. Social media platforms must implement stronger moderation policies to curb hate speech, while sports organizations should create support systems for targeted athletes, including mental health resources, legal advice, and public backing. Additionally, integrating education on digital antisemitism into broader antisemitism prevention programs can help counter the normalization of online hate speech and foster a safer, more inclusive environment both online and offline. This approach is essential not only for protecting athletes from online antisemitism but also for upholding the values of respect, equity, and inclusion in sports and society as a whole.

To conclude, the sports world must take a firm and unequivocal stance against all forms of antisemitism, including Israel-related antisemitism, holding individuals, organizations, and even nations accountable. Only then can an environment be established where hate has no place, and Jewish and Israeli stakeholders, along with their allies, can engage without fear or discrimination. This vision demands both immediate action and long-term commitment, from grassroots initiatives to high-level decisions, ensuring that inclusive practices are integrated across all levels of sport. By cultivating a culture of respect, solidarity, and zero tolerance for hate, sports can return to its core mission: uniting people, celebrating diversity, and uplifting human potential. Through sustained effort, strong leadership, and collaboration, the sports community can become a powerful force for positive change, setting a global example in the fight against antisemitism.

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