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## “Germany’s Victory over Brazil was like the Blitzkrieg”: The Sport-Politics Nexus in Israel During the 2014 World Cup

Tal Samuel-Azran, Yair Galily, Amit Lavie-Dinur & Yuval Karniel

**Abstract:** Various voices assert that the sport-politics nexus that characterized international sport events during the Cold War era is irrelevant in the current age of globalization. This study examines the validity of this argument via a case study of Jewish-Israelis’ fandom tendencies during the 2014 World Cup. A survey conducted during the World Cup games among a representative sample of the Jewish-Israeli population revealed that the Dutch team, whose popularity in Israel has been attributed to the Netherland’s perceived support of Jews during the Holocaust, was the most supported team. The teams most rooted against were Iran, Germany, and Algeria, indicating the potential role of the Holocaust and contemporary Jewish-Islamic relations on fandom tendencies. To better understand the animosity towards the German team, which is surprising in light of current improved Israel-Germany relations and the strength of the German team, we analyzed user comments on Israel’s main online newspaper following the German team’s glorious 7-1 victory against Brazil. The analysis revealed that 51 of the 287 user comments made direct or indirect references to the Holocaust, further highlighting the centrality of nationalism in contemporary sport fandom.

**Keywords:** Football, World Cup, Germany, Brazil, Iran, Israel

Sport events in general, and global sport events in particular, are modes of entertainment that aim to promote a love of sports shared by sport fans from different cultures and nations, and potentially offer a break from international tensions. Specifically, exposure to individual members of groups that are normally perceived as enemies potentially diminishes the dehumanization of these groups (Deford, Kim, & Mravic, 2001), leading some to believe that global sport events may assist in breaking down international stereotypes and tensions (Westhead, 2004). It is argued that during the post-Cold War era, known widely as the global era, sport and politics do not intermingle anymore (e.g., Galily, 2009). This happens as globalization processes in the last two decades, such as the increase in the number of international sport organizations and competitions, and professional athlete migration from one country to another based on talent rather than nationality, have allegedly eliminated the tradition of mixing sport and nationalism (Tamir, Limor, & Galily, 2015; Galily, 2009).

Allegedly, the events that symbolize the global era the most are sport mega-events, such as the Olympic Games and the World Cup games (Black, 2007). It is argued that these events are now truly global as, increasingly, hosts are from the non-West, representing equal opportunity. In addition, in light of the interests of global satellite television networks to maximize profits, the target audience of these events now includes all the various regions of the world to maximize viewership of the games (Gupta, 2009), further illustrating their global nature (Giulianotti, 2012).

Although during the Cold War era the main global sport events, and most notably the Olympic Games, all too often served as an extension of the Cold War (with reciprocal boycott of the Olympic Games by the US and the former Soviet Bloc when each hosted the games) recent studies have found that global sport events continue to reflect an extension of existing international political tensions (Baker & Rowe, 2014).

This line of thought is strengthened by studies that have found that during World Cup matches between English and German teams, for example, the First and Second World War rivalry was persistently brought to the forefront (Vincent, Kian, Pedersen, Kuntz, & Hill, 2010). Moreover, a global study conducted prior to the 2014 World Cup, which took place in Brazil, indicated that football fans in most nations rooted against teams that represented historical and political rival nations (Aisch, Leonhardt, & Qauealy, 2014).

To contribute to the ongoing debate regarding the relevance of the traditional sport-politics nexus in the era of globalization, this study closely examines the fandom tendencies of national teams during the 2014 World Cup, with Israel as its case study. Israel offers an interesting case study in light of its evident decades-long tensions with the Arab and Muslim nations as well as the potential effect of the Holocaust on Jewish-Israeli fandom tendencies. The relevance of these international tensions can thus be analyzed in Israelis' football fandom tendencies. In the context of our study, particularly interesting is the attitude towards the Iranian football team, representing a country that is considered by many Israelis as one of the biggest threats to contemporary Israel, due to its nuclear program and threats made by its leaders (Meir, 2014). Another interesting case is the attitude towards the German team, representing the country behind the greatest tragedy in Jewish history on one hand, yet having strong contemporary relations with Israel on the other. Indeed, at the time of the study Germany was the third largest trade partner with Israel and one of the most desired destinations for relocations for young Israelis (Amit, 2013).

Furthermore, Israel represents a country with a strong football culture whose national football team has not managed to win a place in the World Cup since 1970. Thus local football fans are practically forced to regularly root for a team of another nationality. For these reasons, Israel makes an excellent case study to examine

the link between fandom tendencies and the nationalities of the various football teams competing in the World Cup games. Accordingly, we conducted a survey in which a representative sample of the Israeli population reported on the teams they rooted for and against during the 2014 World Cup. We included only Israeli Jews in this survey, as they are directly identified with the above conflicts and sentiments (in contrast to other groups such as the Muslim or Christian populations in Israel).

### **Does the Sport-Politics Nexus Persist in the Global Era?**

The question regarding the extent to which sports fandom is blind to politics rather than an extension of it has been central for decades. It is not surprising that the World Cup and the Summer Olympic Games — the two largest and most international sport events — have attracted much scholarly attention regarding this question. Analyses of the intersection of Olympic Games and politics span from Jesse Owens' four gold medals in the 1936 Olympic Games in Berlin, which challenged Hitler's racist beliefs (Klapp, 1949); through the massacre of the 1972 Israeli Olympic team during the Summer Olympics in Munich and its political consequences; to the Cold War's contribution to reciprocal US and USSR boycotts of the Olympic games in Moscow 1980 and Los Angeles 1984.

In the World Cup arena as well, studies have highlighted the sport-politics nexus. A famous example is the series of Honduras vs. El Salvador matches in 1969 to qualify for the 1970 FIFA World Cup, which took place concurrently with mounting tension over El Salvadorian immigration to Honduras and subsequent confiscation of land by the Honduran government. On July 14, 1969, following a violent and tense match between the teams, the Salvadoran military launched an attack on Honduras, igniting the Honduras-El Salvador (100-hour) war, which is famously known as the Football War.

While the politics-sport nexus in the Cold War era was evident, some view the post-Cold War era, widely known as the globalization era (Robertson, 1992), as a time in which the relevance of international politics in the sport arena has dramatically decreased. One common explanation is the supposed reduced importance of nationalities and borders in contemporary people's consciousness and increased interdependency between cultures and nations. According to Galily (2009), this happens in tandem with satellite networks' increasing broadcasts of local sport events in different countries to global viewership. Thus, fans have started following the national leagues in different countries and supporting teams in other countries based on the love of sport regardless of borders or nationalities. A notable example is the global following of European local teams in strong football leagues, such as Barcelona and Real Madrid in Spain, Bayern München in Germany and Manchester United and Liverpool in England, all now considered global teams with global fans (ibid.).

Furthermore, the argument goes that in the global era, the mega sport events' hosts adhere to the narrative of global unity and shy away from politics, both in the opening and closing ceremonies and throughout the games (Giulianotti, 2012). Kersting (2007) claims that, indeed, during global competitions in the globalization era, sport-related values such as team spirit and tolerance, multiculturalism, and social solidarity often prevail over ethnic and national tensions. When Germany hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2006, German immigrants from various countries including Turkey overcame the differences between their homeland countries, and wholeheartedly supported the German team, and German football fans simultaneously refrained from routine anti-minority remarks (ibid.). Similarly, the potentially mediating power of sport is expressed in a study by Bandyopadhyay (2008), asserting that contemporary cricket matches involving India and Pakistan trigger hopes of conflict resolution amongst the people of these rival countries. Finally, the argument goes that on a regional level as well, competitions unite between countries; thus, a comprehensive study entitled *Football Passions* (Parks, 2008) conducted in 18 countries in Europe during the UEFA European Championship concluded that football unites fans across the continent and decreases traditional national divisions.

Nevertheless, some insist that these arguments are naïve and that evidence for politics and nationalism involvement in sport persists in the global era. Studies of the World Cup football games and other international football tournaments such as the UEFA Champions League in particular have identified the continued relevance of a sport-politics nexus, possibly because football provides a setting in which two teams, representing two nations, try to defeat each other (Cornelissen & Swart, 2006). Thus, Valeriano (2014; see also Huntington, 2004) describes the tendency of the Latin immigrants living in the US to support the national football teams of their countries of origin, even when these teams play against the US. Similarly, Porat (2010) notes that the football teams of Barcelona and Glasgow are considered to be political symbols of the oppressed Catalanian minority in Spain and the Catholic minority in Scotland, respectively, and fans perceive these teams as weapons against their perceived political aggressors.

Further, Vincent et al. (2010) found that when the teams of England and Germany play against each other during major football competitions, the English and German media regularly frame these matches as a continuation of the "match" between England and Germany during WWII. In a similar manner, Delgado (2003) found that the US media paid more attention to the political implications of the encounter between the national teams of the USA and Iran in the 1998 FIFA World Cup game than to the game itself. In the same competition, the Argentina vs. England game similarly re-ignited tension in both camps, which could be traced to the Falklands War (Alabarces, Tomlinson, & Young, 2001).

Furthermore, and particularly relevant for this study, a global survey of people's favorite teams conducted by YouGov shortly before the 2014 World Cup games

(Aisch, Leonhardt, & Qauealy, 2014) provided further support for the impact of international tensions on attitudes towards rival national teams. According to this survey, England was the most hated team in Argentina (possibly related to the Falklands War), whereas the most hated team in England was Russia, whose relations with the UK were tense on various counts, including the March 2014 annexation of Crimea. The second most hated team in England was Germany, possibly based on the two countries' traditional rivalry since the two world wars. In the same manner, Iran was the least liked team in Germany, the country leading the negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program, and the German team was the least liked in Greece, possibly due to the economic sanctions against Greece led by Angela Merkel.

### **Sport and Politics in Israel**

The question of the sport-politics nexus in the Israeli context has been addressed several times in the past, with evidence for both politicization of sport as well as potential of the sport realm to serve as a conciliatory platform. In fact, the whole structure of Israeli sport teams was shaped by politics. Sport clubs incorporated since the early 1920s were affiliated with political organisations, including: the labour-party affiliated teams of Hapoel (in Hebrew: the labourer); the right-wing ("Revisionist") teams of Beitar; the Maccabi club, which was affiliated with bourgeois political parties; and the Religious-Zionist clubs of Elizur. According to Reshef and Paltiel (1989), the respective affiliation of sport teams were often translated to an extension of the existing politics amongst their fans. Thus, the rivalry based on political tensions was so fierce that the two largest sports organisations, Hapoel and Maccabi, established separate football leagues. In November 1951, only three years after the formation of the Israeli state, the two organisations agreed to form a league that ensured representation of all sports institutes in the country, as well as the establishment of a national team (not before ensuring that this national team would have an equal number of representatives from each sport organisation). Accordingly, the respective parties supported the sport teams throughout the generations. Until today, matches between Hapoel and Beitar are traditionally accompanied with heightened tensions.

At the same time, several studies identified that the Israeli-Arab conflict also regularly plays a role in the Israeli sport fandom arena, although surprisingly not necessarily always in negative terms. Specifically, various government and privately funded initiatives in Israel (for example, The Equalizer, see <http://league.org.il/en/>) encourage mixed football games between Jewish and Arab youth to promote conflict resolution between the groups (Galily, 2007). In addition, past surveys indicated that football games may sometimes serve as a conciliatory factor between Jews and Arabs living in Israel. Notably, a 2003 study conducted in Israel among 448 Arab interviewees between the ages of 18 and 50 found that approximately 66% of all Arab men in Israel were followers of one of the foot-

ball teams in the Israeli league. The survey revealed that football provided a unique opportunity for Arabs in Israel to develop a non-threatening sense of identification with Jewish and Israeli culture (Sorek, 2003).

Importantly, the Arab-Israelis fanning behind Jewish teams has been challenged since the late 1990s by two main Arab teams, Hapoel and Maccabi Sakhnin, who joined to form a strong Arab team, Bnei Sakhnin United, to compete with the Jewish teams. The team, partially sponsored by Qatar (Samuel-Azran, 2016), managed to gain impressive success and won the Israeli Cup in its first season in the major league (2003/4). In sport terms, the team was perceived as a Cinderella that managed to beat teams that were better sponsored and more established, gaining status in the Israeli football realm. Accordingly, Arab-Israelis have begun gunning behind “their own team,” in a shift that underscores the relevance of ethnic background and sport fandom in Israeli football. Indeed, meetings between the right-wing affiliated Beitar Jerusalem and Bnei Sakhnin have often been characterized by violent conflicts between fans. In addition, Beitar Jerusalem fans are renowned for their racist chants and refusal to accept Muslim players. Nonetheless, several studies (e.g. Shor & Yonay, 2011) indicate that even under these conditions Israeli football still includes enclaves of Arabs and Jews who put their love for football above their ethnic and religious identities.

Another potential aspect that pertains to the politicization of Israeli sport beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict is the treatment of the German team. While the traditional hostility towards the German team is comprehensible, in the last few years more and more voices call on Israelis to put the tensions behind them. In 2012, an article on the popular online Israeli platform Mako interviewed Jewish-Israeli fans of the German team who praised the sophisticated soccer, illustrating the team's growing popularity in Israel (Compani, 2012). Several other articles and opinion editorials followed and argued that modern Germany is a strong supporter of Israel and encouraged Jewish-Israelis to fan behind the German team and “let the Germans win” during the 2014 World Cup (e.g. Israel Hayom, 2014). The growingly positive treatment towards Germany in Israel was also expressed by another event that took place that year. In 2014, a Facebook page called Olim L'Berlin (in Hebrew: “Let's Ascend to Berlin”) was started by an Israeli expatriate who moved to Berlin and challenged Israelis to compare the price of several grocery items sold in Berlin to the same products sold in Tel Aviv. Most notably, an Israeli product named Milky – a highly loved pudding in Israel – was sold in Berlin at a fraction of its price in Israel, causing uproar amongst the followers of the page and encouraging many Israelis to show support for the modern lifestyle in Germany. Interestingly, we are not aware of an empirical analysis of the full extent of support of the German team in Israel, thus this study will make a unique contribution to this aspect.

In light of the above, the study's research question is:

RQ: How did the football fandom tendencies of Jewish-Israelis during the 2014 World Cup games reflect a nationalism-sport nexus?

It hence strives to contribute to the existing literature on the role of sport as either bridging between cultures and uniting nations versus one that serves as an extension of politics.

## Method

The case study analysis was based on a survey of attitudes toward the 2014 World Cup teams, performed among a representative sample of the Jewish-Israeli population. The survey was conducted by Panel4all (<https://www.panel4all.co.il>) on July 6 and 7, 2014, during the 2014 World Cup games, among 508 Jewish-Israeli respondents aged 18 or above (the sampling error was 4.4%). Participants responded to questions regarding the teams they root for and against during the World Cup games. In light of the potential relevance of the Jewish-Muslim conflict to sport fandom tendencies in Israel, we chose to examine Jewish-Israelis' attitudes towards other national teams. We excluded other Israeli groups from the survey, because it is reasonable to assume that non-Jews feel less affected by the Holocaust and that the Arab-Muslim population may feel less at conflict with Arab countries and Iran than the Jewish population. Thus, our analysis examined respondents who self-identified in the Panel4all system as Jewish-Israelis, leaving out Arabs (mostly Christian, Muslim, and Druze, along with other faiths) account for over 20% of Israel's population.

Furthermore, to deepen our understanding of the survey results, particularly the extent of a sport-politics nexus in fandom tendencies during the 2014 World Cup, our study will combine the survey with analysis of online user comments to better identify the reasons behind the participants' fandom tendencies. The analysis was conducted on July 9, 2016, following the German team's glorious defeat of Brazil 7-1 in the semi-finals. Our decision to analyze user comments was affected by findings that show that sport fans prefer to identify with successful teams (End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2006; Wann, 2006). With respect to the current strong ties between Germany and Israel, the animosity towards the German team seems surprising. To better understand the reasons behind the negative attitude towards the German team, we examined user comments to an article reporting on Germany's victory on Brazil on Ynet (<http://www.ynet.co.il>), Israel's most popular online newspaper. Our analysis of the online discussions in Israel following the game, conducted via analysis of the Google results to the query "Brazil Germany 7-1". It confirmed that Ynet's article reporting of the game indeed received by far the

most user comments of any platform in Israel.<sup>1</sup> The analysis of hundreds of online commenter reactions to Germany's victory aimed to further our understanding of the reasons for the animosity towards the German team, with special attention to the extent of political content in these comments.

The aim of the analysis was, in particular, to understand to what extent the user comments after the impressive achievement of the German team contained references to Germany's role during the Second World War. This would give an indication as to what extent the animosity towards the German team was based on historical events (versus other potential reasons). The analysis of the 287 comments was conducted by two coders, who were instructed to identify how many comments pertained to politics/history rather than sport, and the sentiment towards Germany or the German team in these comments. A reliability test based on a random sample of 90 comments showed a high level of inter-coder agreement (Krippendorff's Alpha coefficient no lower than .82).

## Results

The survey revealed that the two teams that Israelis most favored in the games were the Netherlands and Brazil (the games' host country), followed by Argentina (see Table 1). There were no significant differences in these results by age or gender.

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<sup>1</sup> 287 user comments, of which 151 are original comments and 136 are responses to these original comments, see <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4540059,00.html>, in Hebrew.

**Table 1: “Which Team Would You Most Like to Win the World Cup?”**

	N	%
Netherlands	95	18.7%
Brazil	92	18.1%
Argentina	63	12.4%
Germany	21	4.1%
Colombia	11	2.2%
Costa Rica	11	2.2%
Spain	7	1.4%
France	7	1.4%
Uruguay	5	1.0%
Italy	5	1.0%
England	5	1.0%
Portugal	5	1.0%
Chile	5	1.0%
Mexico	4	0.8%
Nigeria	3	0.6%
United States	2	0.4%
Australia	1	0.2%
Iran	1	0.2%
Bosnia Herzegovina	1	0.2%
Belgium	1	0.2%
Japan	1	0.2%
Russia	1	0.2%
Switzerland	1	0.2%
Algeria	0	0.0%
Ecuador	0	0.0%
Ghana	0	0.0%
South Korea	0	0.0%
Honduras	0	0.0%
Ivory Coast	0	0.0%
Greece	0	0.0%
Cameroon	0	0.0%
Croatia	0	0.0%
Do not know/not interested in the World Cup games	160	31.3%
	508	100.0%

Iran was by far the team Israelis most rooted against (117 respondents or 23% of all respondents; see Table 2). Germany was ranked the second least favored team, with 35 or 6.9% of the respondents rooting against it. Algeria, a Muslim country with which Israel has no diplomatic relations, was in third place among the teams that Jewish-Israelis rooted against: Of all survey participants, 25 or 4.9% selected Algeria as their least favorite team. There were no significant differences in these results by age or gender.

**Table 2: “Which Team Are You Rooting Against in the 2014 World Cup Games?”**

	N	%
Iran	117	23.0%
Germany	35	6.9%
Algeria	25	4.9%
France	18	3.5%
Brazil	17	3.3%
Russia	12	2.4%
Argentina	7	1.4%
Greece	6	1.2%
Cameroon	6	1.2%
Spain	5	1.0%
South Korea	4	0.8%
Nigeria	4	0.8%
Honduras	3	0.6%
Portugal	3	0.6%
Chile	3	0.6%
Colombia	3	0.6%
Uruguay	2	0.4%
Italy	2	0.4%
England	2	0.4%
Netherlands	2	0.4%
Japan	2	0.4%
Mexico	2	0.4%
Costa Rica	2	0.4%
United States	1	0.2%
Bosnia Herzegovina	1	0.2%
Belgium	1	0.2%
Ghana	1	0.2%
Switzerland	1	0.2%
Australia	0	0.0%
Ecuador	0	0.0%
Ivory Coast	0	0.0%
Croatia	0	0.0%
Do not know/not interested in the World Cup games	221	43.82%
	508	100.0%

Next, as the survey was conducted before the game between Brazil and Germany, we asked the respondents which team they supported in the Brazil-Germany game. The results clearly indicate that the majority of Jewish-Israelis were in favor of Brazil, which is not surprising in light of the results portrayed in Table 1 and Table 2.

**Table 3: “Which Team Would You Support in the Germany-Brazil Semi-Final?”**

	Frequency	%
Brazil	286	56.3%
Germany	89	17.5%
I do not know/ do not care	133	26.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>508</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

### User Comments

As noted, the poll was conducted July 6-7, 2014. While the animosity towards the Iranian and Algerian teams was not surprising in light of the decades-long and ongoing strained Jewish-Muslim relations, the animosity expressed toward the German team, however, was, to an extent, surprising in light of the current strong relations between Israel and Germany. Indeed, Germany is considered one of Israel’s strongest contemporary allies. For example, Germany was one of 14 countries that voted against Palestine’s UNESCO membership in October 2011. Germany has traditionally been Israel’s largest trading partner in Europe and is Israel’s third most important trading partner, after the United States and China. For many years, Germany has sold Israel advanced submarines and has been strongly committed to Israel’s defense. In fact, a 2009 survey that examined Israeli attitudes towards Germany 70 years after the Holocaust found that many groups in Israeli society were sympathetic to Germany (Edelson, 2009). A more recent survey published in 2015 regarding attitudes towards Germany revealed that most Israelis refuse to ban German products to show their protest against Germany and, in fact, favor German products (Aderet, 2015).

Furthermore, the animosity towards the German team is less obvious than that towards the Iranian and Algerian team because, from a pure sport perspective, the German football team in the World Cup 2014 is considered one of the world’s best teams in history. Germany, having won three World Cups, won its fourth title at the 2014 World Cup (following Brazil’s five World Cups wins) and consequently was a target of admiration for football fans worldwide. Aisch et al.’s (2014) poll revealed that it was the team most Brazilians thought would win the World Cup. When considering various study results that sport fans prefer to identify with successful teams (End, Dietz-Uhler, Harrick, & Jacquemotte, 2006; Wann, 2006), Jewish-Israelis’ lack of support for the German team, which ultimately won the 2014 World Cup, calls for an explanation.

The user comments’ analysis revealed that although the majority of the 287 comments (191 comments) were related to sport, mostly criticizing the “weak” Brazil team rather than praising the German team’s achievement, and 45 comments were

coded as “irrelevant” (e.g. comments advertising products such as special diets etc.), 51 of the comments were coded as referring directly or indirectly to the Holocaust and Germany’s role in the Second World War. Of these comments, 29 were coded as “negative” comments in regard to Germany; 15 were coded as “positive” comments, noting that modern Germany is different or that the issue is not relevant in the context of the game; five comments were coded “neutral” and two comments were coded “irrelevant”. The number of comments discussing the Holocaust lauding the incredible sport achievement of the German team illuminates that for many Israeli football fans, the Holocaust remains an important element in conversations about the German team, even during what seemed the German football team’s finest moment.

To illustrate the centrality of the Holocaust in both direct and indirect references in the user comments section, few examples will be provided: already the fifth comment reads “The German destruction machine strikes again and it knows what it’s doing.” The responses to this comment (which appear under the original comment) leave little room regarding the interpretation of the comment by other readers as one that is directly Holocaust-related, with many commenters slamming the commenter as a “troll” and asking the anonymous commenter to be more considerate towards fellow citizens as people reading his comment “might get offended by these words”. One of the responses reads “shame on you for using this provocative term for no apparent reason” and others are calling the commenter an “idiot”. Another commenter (#20) notes that “whoever wrote it was Goebbels’ nephew”. In addition, various commenters asked Ynet’s moderators to censor similar comments in the future.

Other comments were even more aggressive than the above. Thus, comment number 149 makes a direct link between the German football team and the Nazi regime, asserting that “the German team plays with the Nazi tricolor uniform”. Comment number 65 note that the German team’s victory should be viewed in the historical context of the *blitzkrieg*, the German military strategy used in the Second World War to crush their opponents’ line of defense and lead to a quick, decisive victory through a concentration of ground and air attacks. Comment 99 reads, “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” (“Germany, Germany above all”), which has been part of the national anthem of Germany since 1922 and is identified with the Nazis’ perception of Germany’s racial superiority. Comment 102 similarly notes that the German team’s victory over Brazil was “simply a blitz,” and comment number 113 attributes the German team’s victory to the disciplined nature of the German nation, stating that the German team was “just following orders,” alluding to the justification used by Nazi war criminals during the Nuremberg trials and Eichmann’s trial in Israel. Another reference to the *blitzkrieg* appears in 142, while another comment suggesting that the Argentine team, which was about to face Germany in the finals, represents a country which showed support for the Germans during the Second World War and following the Nazi regime’s downfall did not attempt to stop Nazi criminals from finding shelter in Argentina, effectively

seeking to associate both the teams playing in the finals with anti-Semitism and links to the Holocaust.

Interestingly, comments that attempted to praise the role of Germany's culture of hard work in their football team often encountered fierce objections. In response to comment 119 ("Germany is a model nation, an empire that succeeds in everything it does"), other commenters responded: "Indeed, a model for how to start two world wars". Comment 128 also defended Germany, noting: "It is amazing how Israelis like to hate Europeans," and explaining that "Germany was forced into its part in the Holocaust by an Austrian tyrant; Today, Germans are very different and they serve as a source of peace in the world." In response, another commenter stated, "The German team may not be neo-Nazis but they are descendants of Nazis, and that is enough for me to not root for them." Comment 130 is another attempt to praise the German team, attributing its greatness to German self-discipline and efficiency, triggering the following retort: "Yes, they certainly are disciplined like the Aryans were during the Second World War."

## Discussion and Conclusions

Various voices argue that the globalization of sport (reflected in the multi-national composition of teams and values of multiculturalism that have supposedly spilled into the realm of sport) has made the dominant Cold War era argument regarding the sport-politics nexus obsolete (Tamir, Limor, & Galily et al, 2015; Kersting, 2009). This article examines the validity of this optimistic notion via analysis of attitudes of Jewish-Israelis towards the different national teams participating in the 2014 World Cup.

The findings of the present case study strongly support the notion that *sport and nationalism persistently intermingle* even in the so-called global era. The poll conducted amongst a representative sample of the Jewish-Israeli population found that the Netherlands was the team most Israelis rooted for. Importantly, a possible explanation to this can be found in former analyses. They identified that Jewish-Israelis often root for the Netherlands in light of the perception of the Netherlands as one of the only European nations that assisted the Jews during the Second World War (Kuper, 2011). Anthropologist Simon Kuper, who visited Israel to understand Israelis' affinity to Dutch football teams, noted that many Israelis consider Dutch teams, most notably Ajax, as "Jewish" teams that deserved the support of every Israeli. Next, according to the survey, the second team Israelis most strongly cheered for is Brazil. It is not surprising as global surveys indicated that Brazil is the world's most supported team and was considered the favorite to win the World Cup based on the common recognition of the team's superb football skills (Aisch, Leonhardt, & Qauealy, 2014).

Next, we identified the teams that Jewish-Israelis oppose most, and found that, again, these choices were most likely affected by political and historical events, specifically the Holocaust and the Jewish-Muslim conflict. Two of the three least supported teams are Iran (ranked as the most hated team) and Algeria (ranked as the third most opposed team by Israelis), the only teams representing Muslim nations in the World Cup. Iran is considered one of Israel's greatest adversaries, and the Iran nuclear program is viewed as an existential threat to Israel, while Iranian sponsorship of militias such as Hezbollah further adds to the tension between the countries (Benari, 2014). In addition, the Iranian regime officially takes steps to ensure that its athletes do not compete against Israeli athletes, either as individuals or teams, and forces Iranian athletes to retire from international tournaments when they have to compete against Israelis (Chehabi, 2001). Furthermore, Iran also has a strict policy of refusing Israeli athletes' applications to attend Iranian sporting events (Chase, 2012). These policies naturally promote animosity whenever Israeli and Iranian sport teams compete in the same sport event.

The third team Israelis rooted against was Germany (ranked as the second team Jewish-Israelis disapprove). To better understand this result, we analyzed Jewish-Israelis' user comments to an article reporting on Germany's 7-1 victory against Brazil on Israel's most popular online newspaper, Ynet. The analysis revealed that 51 of the 287 comments made some reference, whether direct or indirect, to Germany's role in the Holocaust, indicating it as a central issue in discussions regarding the German football team. Many of the comments that complimented the German teams' brilliant strategy and discipline during the World Cup games encountered objections and references to Nazi Germany's similar obedient nature, illustrating that the Holocaust narratives overpowered sport narratives in the eyes of many Israelis. Taken as a whole, it can be argued that the user comments complement the polls' results and strengthen the notion that the German team still raises strong negative emotion amongst many Israelis in light of its country-of-origin's lead role in the extermination of Jews during the Second World War.

To conclude, altogether, the analysis revealed that both the teams Israelis rooted for and against, and the comments following Germany's greatest victory on Brazil, strongly reflect political and historical tensions. These results reaffirm the notion that sport persistently serves as an extension of war without the weaponry (e.g. Cornelissen & Swart, 2006; Vincent, Kian, Pedersen, Kuntz, & Hill, 2010). The study strongly highlights that it is still far too early and far too naïve to deem the sport-politics nexus obsolete.

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**Tal Samuel-Azran** (PhD, University of Melbourne; MA, New York University) is the Head of the international program at the Sammy Ofer School of Communications. His main fields of research are political communication, new media and media globalization. His book *InterCultural Communication as a Clash of Civilizations* was published in 2016 by Peter Lang Press. His articles were published in leading journals such as *New Media and Society*, *American Behavioral Scientist* and *Computers and Human Behavior*.

Email: [tazran@idc.ac.il](mailto:tazran@idc.ac.il)

**Yair Galily** is an applied Israeli sociologist, mass media and management researcher, founder & head of the Sport, Media and Society (SMS) Research Lab @ Sammy Ofer School of Communications the Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya and former Dean of the Zinman College, Wingate Institute, Israel.

**Amit Lavie-Dinur** is Deputy Dean and Head of the Visual Content & Persuasive Communications Specializations at the School of Communications. She has taught communications courses at leading Israeli universities and colleges and served as the dean of Student Affairs at the Media School of the College of Management in Tel Aviv.

**Yuval Karniel** has extensive experience teaching law and communications courses on media policy, law and ethics in the media, and commercial advertising. He co-directed the Joint Program in Law and Communications at Tel Aviv University. Dr. Karniel also is on the Israel Broadcasting Authority's board and was the general counsel of Israel's Commercial Television and Radio Authority.