



The Council for Mediterranean Diplomacy

Let Israelis and Palestinians Compete in the Mediterranean Games

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July 2022

3,500 athletes from 26 countries competed this summer in the 19th Mediterranean Games in Algeria. For over 70 years, representatives from throughout the region convene every four years – at different countries and under the Olympic umbrella – to compete, set records, and win medals. By doing so, they helped consolidate a shared Mediterranean identity, in a region characterized by a number of intractable conflicts.

But something was missing. While the Mediterranean Games bring together athletes from countries which are at odds with each other, and while the list of participating countries expands to include some non-Mediterranean countries – Israelis and Palestinians are left out. They did not compete in the 2022 games, nor were they invited to compete in any of the previous Mediterranean Games.

Sports has the power of narrowing gaps between parties to conflicts, and sporting events have been utilized throughout the years to tone down political tensions (e.g. the US-China “table tennis diplomacy”), to foster the emergence of new diplomatic ties (e.g. participation of Israeli athletes in sporting events in Morocco and the Gulf), and to increase international recognition of contested entities (e.g. the participation of Palestine in the Olympics).

In the Mediterranean, however, sport is lagging. Israel and the Palestinian Authority are already taking part, as equal members, in regional mechanisms such as the Union for the Mediterranean, the East Mediterranean Gas Forum, and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Mediterranean. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict does play out in these settings, and often creates hardships, but both sides agree to sit with each other, and their participation is accepted by regional actors who do not recognize a Palestinian state nor Israel.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Israel tried to join the Mediterranean Games as a means to protest the Arab boycott against it. Israel lobbied at the time the International Olympic Committee (IOC) as well as friendly countries who were chosen to host the Games. It even sought assistance from members of the US Congress, some of which publicly intervened. But these efforts did not bear fruit. Arab countries objected, and stressed that should they be forced to compete alongside Israeli athletes, that will be the end of the Mediterranean Games.

Times have changed. As progress in Israel-Arab relations was made in the 1990s, following the Oslo Accords, so did the framing of possible Israeli participation. It was not only about Israelis anymore, but also about Palestinians. Once the Palestinians were admitted to the Olympics (in Atlanta, 1996), the option was raised of Israelis and Palestinians joining the Mediterranean Games together, as a sign of peace.

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Israel hoped that the inclusion of the Palestinian team in the Olympics would help Israel's bid to join the Mediterranean Games. However, Arab opposition to Israel's participation continued also in the late 1990s.

Towards the 2005 Mediterranean Games in Spain, Spanish Foreign Minister Miguel Moratinos stated – in a joint press conference with Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom – that he will do whatever he can to have Israelis and Palestinians compete. Moratinos indeed tried to get an invitation for both Israel and the Palestinian Authority, but according to an Israeli official “the Egyptians had effectively blocked the move [...] The Egyptians do not want us to feel that there is no longer pressure on us, so we do not stop dealing with the Palestinians”.

The next edition of the Games, in 2009, was held in Italy, the most active supporter of Israeli and Palestinian participation. Towards the Games, to which Israel and the Palestinian Authority were not invited – Italian Foreign Minister Franco Frattini said that “the inclusion of Israeli and Palestinian athletes in the next [2013] edition “would complete a region of peace”. He also stated that the 2009 Games “will be the last played without the Israeli national team and, I might add, without the Palestinian”. Frattini hoped to sponsor an official public meeting during the opening ceremony of the Games, during which the chairmen of the Israeli and Palestinian National Olympic Committees (NOCs) declare their readiness to participate together in the next Games.

It took a bit longer than expected, but eventually such a joint message was voiced. It was in the context of negotiations that took place in 2011 between the Israeli and Palestinian NOCs. The negotiations were held mostly in Lausanne. They focused on multiple issues, including Israeli travel restrictions on Palestinian athletes, but also dealt with the Mediterranean Games. “Israel and the Palestinians want entry to the 2013 Mediterranean Games being staged in Turkey,” reported the media following the second round of talks in May 2011.

A month earlier, the leaders of the Israeli and Palestinian NOCs were honored in Rome with a “Sport for Peace” concert. At the event, the Italian Vice President of the IOC Mario Pescante referred to their participation in the Games and said that “it is a battle that has been going on for nearly twenty years, it is not very optimistic. Someone will take my place and continue the pursuit. I did not succeed for the Games of Bari (1997), nor for those of Pescara (2009).”

Later in 2011, optimism did emerge. At the time, the IOC announced that it was pleased to learn that the Executive Committee of the International Committee of Mediterranean Games (ICMG) has unanimously called upon all its members to do their utmost to ensure Israeli and Palestinian participation in the next edition of the Games (in Turkey, 2013). Jacques Rogge, then-President of the IOC called this “a great step forward” and emphasized that the IOC has “the moral duty to use sport as a tool for peace and development”. A decision regarding the Israeli and Palestinian participation was anticipated in June 2012, but eventually the issue was dropped last-minute from the Executive Committee's agenda, apparently due to unrelated internal affairs of the ICMG.

In the decade that has passed, no progress was made and the issue was off the ICMG's agenda. The stagnation in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, international campaigns to recognize a Palestinian state led by the Palestinian Authority, and pro-settlement policies of Benjamin Netanyahu's governments have taken their toll on relations between the Israeli and Palestinian NOCs. Negotiations and attempts for cooperation were replaced with disconnect, quarrels and calls for boycott.

But currently there may be a window of opportunity to finally make progress. The Israeli and Palestinian interest to participate in the Games seems to still be in place; under Israel's current government, there has been renewed engagement between top-level Israeli and Palestinian officials and government ministries; and Israel's relations with some countries in the Mediterranean have been improved (Egypt, Jordan, Turkey) and renewed (Morocco).

Efforts towards future Israeli and Palestinian participation should now be relaunched. The goal should be full participation in the 2026 Mediterranean Games in Italy, and symbolic participation already in the 2023 Mediterranean Beach Games in Greece. Italy's long-standing support for Israeli and Palestinian participation, coupled with its being the host of the 2026 Games and with the fact that the current ICMG President is Italian (Davide Tizzano) should help stir developments in the right direction, assuming Israel and the Palestinian Authority decide to formally apply. Should that happen, a three-fourths majority of ICMG countries will be required, and current regional developments make this goal more feasible than ever before.

Inclusion and integration are keys for the success of the Mediterranean as a region, and sports is a tool that can contribute to their advancement. Should the countries of the Mediterranean want to help Israelis and Palestinians advance towards peace, a symbolic step could be to invite them to compete. Running, swimming, and jumping will not bring the two-state solution on their own, but they may help in fostering a sense of shared regional identity and belonging among the conflicting parties. This is the Olympic spirit, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs some more of it.