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## THE MACCABIAH AS A NEW SPORTS DIPLOMACY INSTRUMENT


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### Abstract

*This article examines the Maccabiah Games as a unique case study of new sports diplomacy, analyzing how this non-state sporting event functions as a significant soft power resource for Israel, while operating largely independently of state control and financing. Through analysis of historical documents, legislative frameworks, and policy decisions, we investigate the complex relationship between the Israeli state and the Maccabiah Games, which has evolved since its inception in 1932. We argue that while the Games serve as Israel's primary sporting diplomatic vehicle and enhance its international image, they operate primarily through private and civic networks rather than state direction or consistent financial support. This creates an interesting paradox: the Games' independence from state control allows the sports community to maintain autonomy in pursuing its goals, yet this same independence results in minimal state investment, shifting the financial burden onto participants and the Jewish sports community. Despite the Games' significance in promoting Jewish immigration and strengthening ties with the diaspora, Israel lacks a coherent legal framework or consistent funding mechanism for this quadrennial Olympic competition. While state officials regularly participate in ceremonial aspects and leverage the Games for public diplomacy, concrete institutional support remains limited. This situation reflects both Israel's broader underinvestment in sports infrastructure and its tendency to prioritize hard power over soft power resources. The findings contribute to the theoretical understanding of new sports diplomacy by demonstrating how non-state actors can successfully operate major international sporting events that serve national diplomatic purposes, even without substantial state support. The Maccabiah case illustrates the evolving nature of sports diplomacy, where traditional state-centered approaches are increasingly complemented or replaced by more independent, community-driven initiatives that nonetheless advance national soft power objectives.*

**Keywords:** The Maccabiah Games, Jewish Olympics, Sports Diplomacy, New Sports Diplomacy, Israel, Mega-event.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The modern nation-state recognizes national sports as a powerful source of financial, political, and sociocultural influence, capable of shaping national identity, influencing international relations, and enhancing public image. The 2022 FIFA World Cup hosted in Qatar, demonstrated how major sporting events can serve as gateways to international political recognition.<sup>1,2</sup> Sports mega-events function as showcases of national power, where both state and non-state actors generate, organize, and perform exhibitions of strength through competition.<sup>3</sup>

In Israel, national sports authorities were established in alignment with Zionist ideology, which viewed physical prowess as integral to the Jewish national revival.<sup>4</sup> Jewish sports associations emerged before the state's establishment, aiming to strengthen Jewish athletes worldwide in preparation for the formation of the Jewish state, advancing the Zionist vision of uniting Jews in their future homeland.<sup>5</sup> These sports organizations served as platforms for building sociopolitical connections with both the Jewish diaspora and the international sporting community.

The Maccabiah Games—often called the “Jewish Olympics”<sup>6,7</sup>—exemplify this mission, continuing as one of the most significant manifestations of this sporting tradition. Held every four years in Israel, the Games now attract more than 10,000 athletes from over 80 countries.<sup>8</sup> From its modest beginnings, the event has grown substantially<sup>9</sup> to become the world's third-largest sporting event and the largest Jewish sports gathering, explicitly “combining Zionism and sports.”<sup>10</sup> The Maccabiah Games, organized by the Maccabi World Union (MWU) under the International Olympic Committee (IOC) oversight, have received limited scholarly attention. Research has focused on analyzing the Games' origins, purpose, and significance through

- 1 Micheal Brannagan and Richard Giulianotti, “Soft power and soft disempowerment: Qatar, global sport and football's 2022 World Cup finals” in *Leveraging Mega-Event Legacies*, ed. J. Grix (London, New York: Routledge, 2018), 89–105.
- 2 Yoav Dubinsky, “Clashes of cultures at the FIFA World Cup: Reflections on soft power, nation building, and sportswashing in Qatar 2022,” *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 20, no. 2 (2024): 218–231, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/s41254-023-00311-8>.
- 3 Jonathan Grix and Barrie Houlihan, “Sports mega-events as part of a nation's soft power strategy: The cases of Germany (2006) and the UK (2012).” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 16, no. 4 (2014): 572–596. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.12017>.
- 4 Haim Kaufman, “The National Ideas of the term muscle Judaism,” *Movement: Journal of Physical Education and Sport Sciences* 3 (1996): 261–282.
- 5 Haim Kaufman, “Jewish sports in the Diaspora, Yishuv, and Israel: Between nationalism and politics.” *Israel Studies* 10, no. 2 (2005): 147–167.
- 6 Stuart Murray, *Sports diplomacy: Origins, theory, and practice* (London, New York: Routledge, 2018).
- 7 Yair Galily, “The contribution of the Maccabiah Games to the development of sport in the State of Israel.” *Sport in Society* 12, no. 8 (2009): 1029.
- 8 “About the Maccabiah,” Maccabi World Union (b), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.maccabiah.com/en/>
- 9 Ron Kaplan, *The Jewish Olympics: The History of the Maccabiah Games* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 252–257.
- 10 “Who we are”, The Maccabiah 2022, Accessed December 15, 2024, <https://m21.maccabiah.com/he/maccabiah/who-we-are>.

socio-political<sup>11</sup> and historical<sup>12</sup> perspectives, particularly regarding their connection to Zionist ideology.<sup>13</sup> Galily<sup>14</sup> analyzed the historical and conceptual foundations of the Games' early period, highlighting its interconnected relationship with broader socio-political dimensions and its role in developing Israeli sports organizations. Bar-Eli and Spiegel<sup>15</sup> conducted a gender-based analysis of participating athletes, contributing to comprehensive empirical datasets that documented participant demographics, geographical distribution, and various athletic statistics.<sup>16</sup> Further research has examined the Games' nationalistic elements during opening ceremonies and investigated themes, tactical approaches, and strategic objectives related to nation branding and sports diplomacy.<sup>17</sup>

Like other cultural domains, sports communicate through a universal, nonverbal language. Sporting events facilitate dialogue and can bridge divides between nations and peoples through a shared appreciation of physical activity, competition, and games.<sup>18</sup> Through Murray's "sports diplomacy" framework, the Maccabiah Games serve as an example of a non-state actor from the sports community gaining national and international recognition, thereby enhancing the state's image and global relationships. This article examines the Maccabiah's distinct character as an emerging form of sports diplomacy by a non-state actor, analyzing its role as a significant soft power resource, while investigating the state's regulatory involvement in this premier Olympic sports institution. The research addresses three key questions: 1. How can the Maccabiah Games be understood within the theoretical framework of sports diplomacy? 2. In what ways do the Jewish Olympics serve as a source of soft power for Israel? 3. What legal framework governs the Maccabiah's operations, and what insights can be drawn about state-sports relations from this case?

## 2. SPORTS AS AN INTEGRAL COMPONENT OF THE DIPLOMATIC TOOLKIT

Sports, as an integral part of modern culture, serves as a tool for gaining soft power.<sup>19</sup> Nye coined the term "soft power"<sup>20</sup> to describe an "attractive power" that uses specific resources to "communicate with and attract the public of other countries, rather than merely their

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11 Haim Kaufman and Yair Galily, "Sport, Zionist ideology and the State of Israel", *Sport in Society* 12, no. 8 (2009): 1013–1027, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430430903076316>.

12 George Eisen, *The Maccabiah Games: A History of the Jewish Olympics* (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1979).

13 Hagai Harif, "Muscles Zionism", Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, Ed. Katz, S. (1993). Z'abo. Tel Aviv: Kinneret, 2011 [Hebrew].

14 Galily, "Contribution of Maccabiah", 1028–1037.

15 Michael Bar-Eli and Adara Spiegel, "Israeli women in the Olympic and Maccabiah games, 1932–1992: Patterns of stability and change", *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 31, 4 (1996): 385–403, <https://doi.org/10.1177/101269029603100403>.

16 Haim Kaufman, "The Maccabiah Games and their Importance, Past and Present," *Zemanim History Quarterly* (2013): 90–99; See also Kaplan, *Jewish Olympics*.

17 Yoav Dubinsky and Lars Dzikus, "Israel's strategic and tactical use of the 2017 Maccabiah Games for nation branding and public diplomacy," *Journal of Applied Sport Management* 11, no. 1 (2019): 5.

18 Murray, "Sports diplomacy", 2.

19 Håvard Møkleiv Nygård and Scott Gates, "Soft power at home and abroad: Sport diplomacy, politics and peace-building," *International Area Studies Review* 16, no. 3 (2013): 235–243, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2233865913502971>.

20 Joseph Nye, *Soft power: The means to success in world politics* (Public affairs: 2004). Also: Joseph Nye, "Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept". *The Journal of International Communication* 28, no. 1 (2022): 1–7.

governments.<sup>21</sup> His framework identifies economy, technology, and culture as key resources that enhance a state's ability to achieve international objectives. Governments deploy soft power through public diplomacy to influence hearts and minds by leveraging attractive culture, coherent political values, and legitimate foreign policies.<sup>22</sup> Sports effectively meet these cultural criteria as a recognized source of such power at the practical level. For example, Vakil and Quilliam<sup>23</sup> identify various "markers" of soft power, ranging from sporting achievements and public relations to technological innovation, religious tolerance, and economic policy, in the case of the Abraham Accords, signed between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco.<sup>24</sup> Sports' effectiveness in public relations stems from its role as a state's "cultural good," shaping both domestic and international perceptions.

The assimilation of soft power resources occurs through internal practices and directed policies.<sup>25</sup> States base their soft power activities on distinct resources, targeting specific audiences.<sup>26</sup> While soft power serves diplomatic purposes<sup>27</sup> and draws upon popular culture,<sup>28</sup> international sports create unique opportunities for governments to demonstrate their state power and athletic prowess.<sup>29</sup> Sports provide a platform for public exposure and influence diplomatic relations between governments, nations, and peoples.<sup>30</sup> Large-scale sporting competitions, with their global significance and mass appeal, serve states' foreign policy goals through soft power demonstrations via public diplomacy.<sup>31</sup> This reinforces the understanding that sports constitute a cultural soft power resource, intersecting with various diplomatic contexts.<sup>32</sup>

Sports mega-events function as a crucial component of governmental diplomatic strategy for generating soft power within a broader strategic framework.<sup>33</sup> Given the fundamental importance of soft power in building and shaping states' foreign relations, image, and reputation,<sup>34</sup> the sports platform facilitates communication, demonstration, and enhancement of public relations. Sports diplomacy encompasses the strategic use of consensus-building, normative practices in sports, athletic figures, sporting events, and non-state actors by foreign affairs ministries to maximize initiatives spanning people-to-people connections, commerce,

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21 Joseph Nye, "Public diplomacy and soft power", *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 94–109, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>.

22 Nye, "Public Diplomacy", 95–96.

23 Sanam Vakil and Neil Quilliam, "The Abraham Accords and Israel–UAE Normalization." Chatham House, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/03/abraham-accords-and-israel-uae-normalization/03-security-landscape> (дата звернення 09.04. 2023) (2023).

24 Vakil and Quilliam, "Abraham Accords", 32.

25 Nye, "Public Diplomacy", 95.

26 Jon Dart, "Brand Israel: Hasbara and Israeli sport", *Sport in Society* 19, no. 10 (2016): 1402, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2015.1133595>.

27 Hongying Wang and Yeh-Chung Lu, "The conception of soft power and its policy implications: A comparative study of China and Taiwan." *Journal of Contemporary China* 17, no. 56 (2008): 425–47.

28 Nye, "Public Diplomacy", 96.

29 Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman, "Mapping the relationship between international sport and diplomacy", *Sport in Society* 17, no. 9 (2014): 1100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17430437.2013.856616>.

30 Ibid, 1107.

31 Grix and Houlihan, "Sports Mega-events", 573.

32 Ibid, 576–578.

33 Jonathan Grix and Paul Michael Brannagan, "Of mechanisms and myths: Conceptualising states' soft power" strategies through sports mega-events." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27, no. 2 (2016): 251–272.

34 Murray, "Sports Diplomacy", 93.

and education.<sup>35</sup> This diplomacy manifests in various forms, from hosting and participating in significant events aligned with state interests,<sup>36</sup> to sponsoring sports exchanges and disseminating expertise.<sup>37</sup> Sports Mega-events,<sup>3839</sup> therefore, constitute an integral element of a state's cultural soft power resources.<sup>40</sup>

Murray<sup>41</sup> delineates two distinct forms of sports diplomacy. The traditional form encompasses the governmental use of sports as a diplomatic instrument, employing diplomatic messaging and public events to facilitate interstate dialogue.<sup>42</sup> The archetypal example of sports soft power emerged through "Ping Pong Diplomacy," which implemented a foreign policy that enabled the regime to transmit and reproduce its cultural image.<sup>43</sup> The non-traditional form (or "new sports diplomacy") addresses non-state actors, diplomatic representation, various communication forms, and their diplomatic implications.<sup>44</sup> This approach emphasizes networks of diverse actors in collaborative strategies, where governments no longer maintain primary agency.<sup>45</sup> Traditional and new sports diplomacy frequently "overlap on important occasions," combining multiple actors' involvement in representation and negotiation across governments, sports entities, global media, and civil society.<sup>46</sup>

As Murray argues, sports have evolved into a vital soft power resource, transcending mere spectacle to become an integral component of the diplomatic toolkit in demonstrating connections between nations, states, and divided peoples.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, comprehensive research must examine all actors performing diplomatic functions by analyzing their political actions and roles within the international sports community,<sup>48</sup> encompassing both state entities engaged in traditional diplomacy and sports organizations representing new/non-traditional diplomatic forms.<sup>49</sup> The following sections analyze the Maccabiah Games through the theoretical framework of an international sports mega-event, primarily operated by non-state entities that enhance the state's soft power image through a hybrid implementation of traditional and new sports diplomacy.

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35 Ibid, 94.

36 Udi Carmi and Orr Levental, "Ambassadors in track suits: The public relations function of Israeli delegations to the Olympic games during the State's first decade". *Sport History Review* 50, no. 1 (2019): 17–37, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/shr.2018-0042>.

37 Dubinsky, "Clashes of cultures".

38 Hila Zahavi and Gal Ariely, "The Eurovision song contest and the potential of unintended events and public diplomacy: How exposure to an international mega-event shapes external views of the EU". *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 32, no. 5: (2024): 1148–1160, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14782804.2024.2324289>.

39 Brannagan and Giulianotti, "Soft power", 89–105; Grix and Brannagan "of mechanisms"; Grix and Houlihan, "Sports Mega-events".

40 Nye, "Public Diplomacy"; Nye "Soft Power origins".

41 Muraay, "Sports Diplomacy".

42 Murray and Pigman, "Mapping the relationship", 1099.

43 Nygård and Gates, "Soft Power home", 236.

44 Murray and Pigman, "Mapping the relationship", 1099–100.

45 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*.

46 Murray and Pigman, "Mapping the relationship", 1099–101.

47 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*, 126.

48 Ibid, 3–5.

49 Ibid, 5–6.

### 3. ON POLICY, LEGISLATION, AND SOFT POWER MECHANISMS: THE CASE OF THE MACCABIAH GAMES

#### 3.1. State-sports relations: socio-political background

In Israel, sports function as an instrument for constructing political, ethnic, class, and gender-based identities.<sup>50,51</sup> During the nation's formative years, all sports clubs maintained explicit political-Zionist affiliations.<sup>52</sup> Prior to Israel's establishment, the Zionist movement embraced sports as an integral component in shaping Jewish cultural and national identity.<sup>53</sup> At the Second Zionist Congress in 1898, Dr. Max Nordau introduced the concept of "Muscle Judaism," an ideology that articulated the aspirational Jewish image.<sup>54</sup> This ideology sought to cultivate a "strong" and "warrior" Jew—humble and connected to nature—who would revive ancient heroism myths in the Land of Israel, in contrast to the "exiled" Jew, characterized as "weak," "oppressed," and "skinny." In response to rising antisemitism in Europe, Nordau believed that physical education for youth would facilitate the revival of the "lost muscular Judaism."<sup>55</sup> This emphasis on athletic development aligned with contemporary movements, as Muscular Christianity and German Turnen had incorporated gymnastics into educational systems throughout Germany and Eastern Europe.<sup>56</sup> This ideology catalyzed the emergence of sports clubs and significantly influenced Jewish masculinity and sports associations.<sup>57</sup>

Sports, as envisioned through Nordau's ideology, facilitated the integration of physical strength into broader national missions, connecting to Jewish history and narratives of national heroes,<sup>58</sup> while serving as an instrument for Jewish national unity.<sup>59</sup> His philosophy laid the foundation for numerous Jewish National Sports Associations, many of which were named after Jewish warriors.<sup>60</sup> The project of Jewish state-building incorporated this pragmatic utilization of sports to address security, political, and social imperatives, tasks undertaken by sports club members.<sup>61</sup>

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50 Amir Ben Porat, 'How much did H'apoel score?' The transformation of the game to commodity: The case of Israeli soccer", *Megamot* (1999): 517–534.

51 Shlomit Guy, "Go West: The Westernization of Israeli Football in the Early Twenty-First Century", *Israel Studies Review* 34, no. 3 (2019): 34–46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48563851>.

52 Haim Kaufman, "'Maccabi' versus 'Hapoel', the formation of the political division in sports H'Eretz-Israeli", in *Body Culture and Sport In Israel in the 20th century*, eds. Haim Kaufman and Hagai Harif (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi and the Wingate Institute, 2002): 89–112.

53 Kaufman, "National ideas", also "Jewish sports".

54 Bar-Eli and Spiegel, "Israeli women"; also, Boryana Angelova-Igova, "The Meaning of Sport as Multicultural Dialogue in Max Nordau's Philosophy", in *Sport, Identity, and Community*, eds. Andy Harvey and Richard Kimball (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 143–150, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848884526\\_014](https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848884526_014).

55 Kaufman, "National ideas", 262–265.

56 Tod Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish body and the politics of regeneration* (London, New York: Routledge, 2007).

57 Yoav Dubinsky, *Israel's Use of Sports for Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy* (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2018): 32.

58 Kaufman, "National ideas", 270.

59 Kaufman, "National ideas", 261.

60 *Bar Kochva, Samson the Hero, Bar Giora, and Yehuda the Maccabee (also: Maccabi)*, in Kaufman, "National ideas", 262–264, 271.

61 Harif, "Muscle Zionism", 125.



The “Maccabi” Sports Association was established as a Zionist sports organization<sup>62</sup> with a goal to engage Jewish youth who lacked national affiliation, reconnecting them to Judaism through athletic participation.<sup>63</sup> The first Maccabi club, “Maccabi Kushta,” emerged in Constantinople in 1895,<sup>64</sup> driven by rising antisemitism and local sports associations as mechanisms for strengthening national consciousness and the Zionist movement.<sup>65</sup> The name ‘Maccabi’ symbolized the training of its members as a “fighting force” in the national struggle to create the “new Jew.”<sup>66</sup> Members of these sports associations undertook practical responsibilities, including physical guarding and security protection, tasks essential for safeguarding Jewish settlements in what would become Israel.<sup>67</sup>

The history of sports clubs in Israel chronicles their establishment through political movements aligned with Zionist ideologies.<sup>68</sup> Following the state establishment, identification with specific sports clubs reflected affiliation with particular political perspectives, which were utilized and financially supported by the ruling party of each association.<sup>69</sup> In the unique context of “state-building,” this political framework drove development and maintained overall financial resources. Subsequently, perceptions of sports evolved gradually, adopting free market economic principles, and viewing sports as a commercial enterprise.<sup>70</sup> With the commercialization of Israeli sports,<sup>71</sup> Zionist parties’ involvement in the sports clubs diminished significantly, transferring control to private entities, state sports institutions, and civic organizations. Maccabi remained the most prominent association, expanding and enhancing its sports enterprise while continuing to implement Nordau’s vision of Muscle Judaism.

Sports as a “soft power resource” enabled Israel to establish international connections during its early years of diplomatic isolation. While Israeli national teams competed across different continents (Asia, Europe, and America), Arab nations refused to engage with Israeli teams for political reasons.<sup>72</sup> During Israel’s first decade (1948–1958), Olympic delegations were strategically utilized for public relations to project positive state values.<sup>73</sup> Despite recognizing sports as a national mission, Zionist institutions maintained indifference toward athletics, preferring to view it as an auxiliary tool for the War of Independence (1948) rather than as a field worthy of independent support, consequently withholding financial assistance from sports associations.<sup>74</sup> Prime Minister David Ben Gurion led the perspective that sports were merely “means and not a target,” distinguishing between workers’ sports and bourgeois

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62 Kaufman, “Maccabiah games”.

63 Kaufman, “National ideas”, 275.

64 “History,” Maccabi World Union Archive, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://archive.maccabi.org/>.

65 Kaufman, “Maccabiah games”, 90.

66 Harif, “Muscle Zionism”, 127.

67 Ibid, 128.

68 Kaufman, “Maccabi versus”.

69 Ben Porat, “How much:”, see also Amir Ben Porat, “Progress and its lessons: Is there only one future?- Preface,” *Movement: Journal of Physical Education & Sport Sciences* 1, no. 22 (2006): 7–19.

70 Udi Carmi, “From Enthusiasts to professionalism: the beginning of elite sports in Israel,” *Social Issues in Israel* (2020): 193–220.

71 Amir Ben Porat, “‘Linesmen, Referees and Arbitrators’: Politics, Modernization and Soccer in Palestine”, in *Europe, Sport, World*, ed. J.P. Mangan (London, New York: Routledge, 2013): 131–154.

72 Carmi and Levental, “Ambassadors”, 21.

73 Carmi and Levental, “Ambassadors”, 18.

74 Kaufman, “National ideas”, 276.

athletics, despite sports' importance to the state and its residents and its construction within Zionist ideology. This stance conflicted with other Labor party members who viewed sports as vital for achieving political, educational, or security objectives. The broader labor movement dismissed sports as "a bourgeois amusement" that diverted resources from nationally important assignments.<sup>75</sup>

### 3.2. The Maccabiah Games

Yosef Yekutieli, a Maccabi association member, attended the Maccabi World Congress in Czechoslovakia in 1929, where he presented to the MWU the idea of the "Maccabiah" – the first-ever mass competition modeled after the Greek Olympics that would bring together Jewish athletes from around the world. Yekutieli's proposal was accepted, and the inaugural games were planned to commemorate the 1,800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Bar Kokhba Revolt.<sup>76</sup> The first Maccabiah, organized in 1932, in Tel Aviv under British Mandatory Palestine, brought together 390 athletes from various countries across Europe, Asia, and the United States (US). Participants competed in numerous sports, including athletics, swimming, soccer, field hockey, tennis, handball, water polo, and fencing.<sup>77</sup> The MWU cooperated with the Tel Aviv municipality and Jewish authorities to organize the event, which included the construction of a special stadium for the occasion, as documented by the Zionist Archive.

Beyond developing sports culture, the Maccabiah was intended to strengthen the connection between the Land of Israel and Jewish communities abroad and to encourage young people to immigrate there. Indeed, there were athletes, mainly from Europe, who took advantage of their stay in the country and remained there without immigration permits after the Games ended.<sup>78</sup>

The concept of "Muscle Judaism" and its manifestation in the Maccabiah Games has been extensively studied,<sup>79</sup> alongside research examining prominent Jewish athletes throughout the Games' history.<sup>80</sup> Dubinsky argues that the Maccabiah Games have evolved in parallel with the State of Israel, serving as one of the Zionist Movement's most significant tools. They persevered through "security threats and international political boycotts" while continuing to "break records of attendance and participation, bringing tens of thousands tourists to Israel, having a touristic, cultural and even diplomatic role in modern Zionism."<sup>81</sup> The Games' fundamental purpose of encouraging Jewish immigration to Israel has remained constant throughout its history.<sup>82</sup> Each tournament features a distinct public relations campaign,

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75 Udi Carmi and Anat Kidron, "Maccabi- From Sports Association to a Political Party", in *Sportgeschichte in Deutschland-Sport History in Germany: Herausforderungen und internationale Perspektiven-Challenges and International Perspectives*, eds. Michael Krüger, Annette R. Hofmann (Heidelberg, Springer: 2020), 101–124.

76 "Maccabiah History," Jewish Sports Museum, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://history.maccabiah.com/he/maccabiah-history>.

77 "Maccabiah Games," The Central Zionist Archive, World Zionist Organization, accessed December 15, 2024, <http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/Pages/Maccabiah.aspx>.

78 "Maccabiah Games," The Central Zionist Archive, World Zionist Organization, accessed December 15, 2024, <http://www.zionistarchives.org.il/Pages/Maccabiah.aspx>.

79 Angelova-Igova, "Meaning of sports".

80 Kaufman, "Maccabiah games".

81 Dubinsky, *Israel's use*.

82 Dubinsky, *Israel's use*, 33.

complete with branded materials, advertisements, and creative themes that emphasize the Zionist ideology of connecting Jewish communities worldwide through their relationship with Israel.

In 1960, the IOC recognized the MWU as meeting Olympic standards. Despite opposition from several Arab states, the Maccabiah was granted Olympic status as a regional competition among the international sports unions.<sup>83</sup> This IOC recognition was crucial for Israel's international image and diplomatic relations, as the country faced numerous challenges due to its complex security and territorial conflict with Palestinians and neighboring states. The IOC's acknowledgment required the Maccabi Organizing Committee to adhere to international sports regulations and norms, aligning with Israel's broader commitment to Olympic values in its sports education system.<sup>84</sup>

Despite attracting thousands of Jewish athletes and Israel's aspirations for developing professional sports, the government provided limited support to these Olympic events that represented its national values. During the 7<sup>th</sup> Maccabiah in 1965, the state contributed merely 8% of the event's total budget of 4.2 million NIS, even though the Games drew 10,000 participants and visitors from 21 countries.<sup>85</sup> The 1969 organizing committee noted a decline in Olympic sports performance standards and determined that insufficient state funding had negatively impacted the Israeli delegation's competitive level. The Israeli team comprised only 25% of the total 1,450 Jewish competitors.<sup>86</sup>

Despite Israel's Olympic aspirations, the Maccabiah Games experienced a decline in their status as an international Olympic event. Although athlete participation continued to grow steadily,<sup>87</sup> the long-anticipated increase in state investment never materialized. The 1997 opening ceremony turned tragic when a bridge collapse killed four Australian athletes and injured many others.<sup>88</sup> This devastating incident highlighted the consequences of the state's diminished prioritization of sporting events relative to other concerns. In the aftermath, it became evident that the Maccabiah lacked proper legal framework and was driven more by sporting organizations than government oversight. This was exemplified during the 2001 Games when no government ministry volunteered to take responsibility for security measures. Instead, the event was treated as a local matter for the Jerusalem municipality, which hosted the opening ceremony, rather than as an international Olympic venue that could enhance Israel's standing in the Jewish world.<sup>89</sup> Nevertheless, the Maccabiah continued to attract significant participation, drawing over 7,000 athletes to both the 17<sup>th</sup> Games in 2005 and the 18<sup>th</sup> Games in 2009.<sup>90</sup>

Over time, the Maccabiah's Olympic prestige diminished among international athletes, as

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83 Galily, "Contribution of Maccabiah", 1032.

84 Rebekka Lang Fuentes, *Olympism, and Human Rights: A Critical Analysis Comparing Different National Olympic Education Programmes in Europe* (Heidelberg: Springer Nature, 2022).

85 Galily, "Contribution of Maccabiah", 1032–1033;

86 Galily, "Contribution of Maccabiah", 1033.

87 For example, from 980 athletes in 1957 to 5,000 athletes in 1992, Kaufman, "Maccabiah games", 95–97.

88 Galily, "Contribution of Maccabiah", and Kaufman, "Maccabiah games".

89 Tal Ben Baruch, "Maccabiah: Who is responsible for safety?", *Ynet*, April 4, 2001, <https://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-664569,00.html>.

90 Kaufman, "Maccabiah games", 96–97.

many participants were not actively involved in competitive sports. This decline, coupled with minimal media coverage outside the opening ceremony, contributed to waning public interest in Israel.<sup>91</sup> The reduced engagement can be attributed to several factors: evolving relationships between Israel and the Jewish diaspora, with the Games reinforcing diaspora identity rather than promoting immigration to Israel; the emergence of modern antisemitism necessitating counter-events; Israel's complex position in international sports organizations, facing ongoing boycotts from some Middle Eastern states; and the broader shift toward recreational sports, rather than concentration on athletic excellence, which has impacted the Games' competitive quality.<sup>92</sup>

### 3.3 LEGISLATION AND POLICY

The evolution of Israeli foreign relations toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>93</sup> paralleled two contrasting trends in the Maccabiah Games: a significant increase in overall Jewish participation,<sup>94</sup> coupled with declining involvement from internationally recognized Jewish Olympic athletes.<sup>95</sup> One explanation for this shift may lie in the growing financial burden placed on participants over the past two decades. As financial support reflects state policy priorities, an examination of government investment in the Games during this period reveals the absence of a consistent economic framework to support the Maccabiah's national significance.

In 2005, state funding for the Maccabiah amounted to just \$1.5 million, while participant fees (\$2,250 per person) generated \$13 million.<sup>96</sup> Zvi Varshevsky, chairman of the Maccabi Israel association, noted that the Maccabiah's state funding was classified as "special" and separate from the Ministry of Sports and Culture's \$17 million budget. He explained that the state lacked sufficient resources to increase sports investment, particularly for the Maccabiah.<sup>97</sup> By 2009, the Games' total budget reached \$20 million, funded primarily through participant fees of \$2,930 per athlete. Despite this limited state investment, the Games generated approximately \$40 million in revenue for Israel's economy.<sup>98</sup>

In 2013, participant fees rose to \$3,700 per person, while media outlets criticized the event as "unnecessary for Israeli society," highlighting its commercial focus at the expense of athletic quality.<sup>99</sup> State investment during this period amounted to \$5–6 million.<sup>100,101</sup> For the 2017

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91 Kaufman, "Maccabiah games", 97.

92 Kaufman, "Maccabiah games", 97–98.

93 Uri Bialer, *Israeli Foreign Policy: A People Shall Not Dwell Alone* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2020).

94 Jewish Sports Museum, "Maccabiah history".

95 Kaufman, "Maccabiah games", 97.

96 Aviva Carol, "The Maccabiah is not an expense, in my opinion, it is an income," *Globes*, July 12, 2005, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=933228>.

97 Carol, "Maccabiah".

98 ONE system, "Maccabiah is supposed to bring in about NIS 140 million into the economy," *Sports ONE*, January 4, 2009, <https://www.one.co.il/Article/129811.html>.

99 Tal Volak, "120 million shekels for a side event: Isn't it time to give up on the Maccabiah?," *Globes*, July 16, 2013, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1000862500>.

100 Walla Sports, "The government approved allocating NIS 18 million to Maccabiah", *Walla Sports*, June 12, 2012, <https://sports.walla.co.il/item/2540861>.

101 Prime Minister Office, "Holding the 19th Maccabiah events in the summer of 2013—Resolution number 4746 of the government of 10.06.2012", July 12, 2012, [https://www.gov.il/he/pages/2012\\_des4746](https://www.gov.il/he/pages/2012_des4746).

Games, the government initially approved only \$1 million, but later increased funding by 27% compared to 2013.<sup>102</sup> However, the state's contribution remained a minority share of the total budget.

The 2022 Maccabiah reached a budget of \$60–70 million, attracting 10,000 athletes from 80 countries. While the event's income matched its expenses, with both the Jerusalem municipality and the state benefiting as recipients, funding came primarily from participant and athlete fees. Beyond the financial aspects, the Games maintained their role in promoting immigration, with approximately 5% of participants reportedly relocating to Israel following the event.<sup>103</sup> The latest statistics highlight Israel's expected benefits from these traditional tournaments. While the state maintains limited direct financial investment, it capitalizes on Maccabiah's status as a national asset associated with "positive" immigration. Each tournament is commemorated through special government-issued medals available for public purchase. The Governmental Unit for Coins and Medals maintains this tradition to preserve the Games' place in Israeli sports history. For instance, in 2013, the Unit released special commemorative medals, describing them as "historical souvenirs." These medals incorporated various national symbols, including the state emblem, a stylized Maccabiah torch integrated with a Star of David pattern, and the biblical phrase "Light as an eagle, runs like a deer."<sup>104</sup> The promotional material for these medals emphasized their connection to Jewish immigration, stating:

The Maccabiah held once every four years, is the largest Jewish sporting event in the world. The feeling of belonging to the people and the country is getting stronger and some *immigrate to Israel*. For all sports enthusiasts and lovers of the Land of Israel, the medal.<sup>105</sup>

In the context of Jewish immigration, the Law of Return (1950), under which the Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism operates, is positioned as a key beneficiary of the Maccabiah Games. The Law of Return establishes the fundamental right of all Jews in the diaspora to immigrate to Israel, subject to specific restrictions and definitions regarding Jewish heritage.<sup>106</sup> The Ministry for Diaspora Affairs and Combating Antisemitism, as the governmental institution responsible for connections with the Jewish diaspora abroad, is deeply involved in content creation, publication, and communication with potential Jewish immigrants. According to its official website, the Ministry pursues three national objectives: strengthening Jewish identity and connections to Israel among diaspora communities, combating global antisemitism, and countering delegitimization of Israel.<sup>107</sup>

The Ministry actively collaborates with Jewish communities and pro-Israel organizations

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102 Prime Minister office, Government Decision 2167, "Holding the 20th Maccabiah events in the summer of 2017 Resolution number 831 of the government dated 13.12.2015", [https://www.gov.il/he/pages/2015\\_dec8316.6.2017](https://www.gov.il/he/pages/2015_dec8316.6.2017).

103 Uriel Deskel, "10,000 athletes, a budget of NIS 200 million: the numbers behind Maccabiah", *Calcalist*, June 7, 2022, [https://www.calcalist.co.il/sport\\_news/article/b1ecmahdq](https://www.calcalist.co.il/sport_news/article/b1ecmahdq).

104 "The 19<sup>th</sup> Maccabiah", Israel Coins and Medals Corporation, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://il.israelmint.com/he/21973390.html>.

105 "The 19<sup>th</sup> Maccabiah", Israel Coins and Medals Corporation.

106 "Law of return-1950, Nevo," Last version: September 18, 2023 [https://www.nevo.co.il/law\\_html/law00/72231.htm](https://www.nevo.co.il/law_html/law00/72231.htm).

107 "About," The Ministry for Diaspora Affairs, accessed November 20, 2024, [https://www.gov.il/en/pages/about\\_diaspora](https://www.gov.il/en/pages/about_diaspora).

to “strengthen the relationship between the State of Israel and the Jewish communities in the Diaspora and to improve their resilience [...] in increasing the number of students who study in Jewish education through the strengthening of the ‘Educational Axis’ using training, significant pedagogical moves, and economic assistance.”<sup>108</sup>

Given its responsibility for increasing annual Jewish immigration to Israel, the Ministry views the Maccabiah Jewish Olympics as a strategic platform for encouraging young Jews to relocate from their countries of origin. This connection between the Maccabiah Games and immigration has been present since the event’s early years. During the third Maccabiah Games, the official website highlighted the significance of the newly legislated Law of Return.

That year, Jerusalem was proclaimed the capital of Israel and the Knesset passed the Law of Return, permitting every Jew to immigrate to Israel and become a citizen. 170,000 Jews availed themselves of the opportunity, most of whom came from North Africa. Due to the lack of facilities, many of them were housed in tent cities.<sup>109</sup>

According to the Jewish Agency, as of 2024, the global Jewish population stands at 15.7 million, with 7.2 million residing in Israel.<sup>110</sup> The Maccabiah Games consistently serve as a platform to promote Jewish immigration to Israel. This strategic approach is also reflected in parliamentary proceedings. Prior to the 2013 Games, the chair of the Knesset’s Absorption Committee, a former Judo athlete, stressed the importance of providing support to athletes arriving with the intention to immigrate. However, despite recognizing the Games’ role in strengthening ties with the Jewish diaspora, no additional funding was allocated to the Maccabiah itself.<sup>111</sup> In recent years, this immigration pathway has become particularly relevant for Jewish athletes from Russia and Ukraine, who participated in the Maccabiah following the outbreak of war in February 2022.<sup>112</sup>

The Law of Sports (1988), which might be expected to provide the primary legal framework for a major national sporting event, notably lacks provisions for financial investments in sports events, focusing instead on infrastructure and sports facilities.<sup>113</sup> Chapter Two of the Law primarily addresses regulatory aspects of sports administration, such as the committee for position appointing (Amendment No. 7), which is established by the Minister of Culture and Sports (Section C). Significantly, the law makes no specific mention of the Jewish Olympics, nor does it address other state investments in sports. Chapter Three outlines the structure of The National Sports Council (Amendment No. 6), comprising 20 members from sports institutions (including the Olympic Committee in Israel) along with representatives from the Ministry of Treasury (Section B2) and the Ministry of Justice (Section B3) (Amendment No. 14).

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108 “About”, The Ministry of Diaspora.

109 “The third Maccabiah”, Maccabi World Union (a), accessed November 20, 2024, <https://www.maccabiah.com/en/?view=article&id=600:third-maccabiah&catid=41>.

110 The Jewish Agency, “Rosh Hashanah Eve 5774: Approximately 15.7 million Jews in the world, of which 7.2 million live in Israel”, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.jewishagency.org/il/jewish-population-report-2023/>.

111 Oren Aharoni, “Razvovoz: “Athletes are ambassadors, we should invest in them”, *Ynet*, May 20, 2013, <https://www.ynet.co.il/article/4381881>.

112 Ilana Stottlend, “Their victory: Meet the new immigrants who will compete in the Maccabiah”, *Maariv*, July 14, 2022, <https://www.maariv.co.il/sport/other/Article-931583>.

113 “Law of Sports-1988”, Nevo, accessed December 15, 2024, [https://www.nevo.co.il/law\\_html/law01/p171m1\\_001.htm#med1](https://www.nevo.co.il/law_html/law01/p171m1_001.htm#med1).

A 2018 amendment expanded the council's responsibilities to include: advising the Minister on developing comprehensive, long-term sports policy for promoting physical activity and sports in Israel; counseling on priority-setting for sports resource allocation, including athlete identification and development; and formulating recommendations on sports-related matters as requested by the Minister or Minister of Finance, with such recommendations being submitted for ministerial review.

The absence of structured planning for preserving and investing in the largest Jewish sports event is notable in the legal framework. This lack of legal provisions regarding state support is further highlighted by ongoing struggles over financial investments in the Maccabiah. While this does not preclude involvement from the Minister of Sports and Culture in event preparations – as evidenced by the Minister's participation in revealing the new logo and emphasizing the Games' significance to Israel<sup>114</sup> – it does reflect a disconnect between ceremonial support and institutional backing. Notably, even the 2017 Maccabiah's "Charter of Service" lacks any reference to Israeli law as a source of authority for conducting the events in Israel.<sup>115</sup>

The two main governmental ministries involved in the Maccabiah focus primarily on its potential political benefits, such as promoting immigration and organizing a large-scale event independently. However, no Israeli law exists to regulate or structure the Maccabiah's operations. Prior to the 2022 Games, criticism appeared on Ynet – Israel's most popular news site – highlighting both the absence of state financing and declining athletic standards. The article noted that:

To compete in the Olympics, the athletes are required to meet international and local criteria. The Jewish Olympics works differently and is managed by "Maccabi World Union," which operates hundreds of clubs in about 80 countries [...] The amount required by the Maccabiah headquarters for each guest participant is 3,958 dollars [...] This is a kind of *unregulated* market.<sup>116</sup>

In addition, the state's financial participation in the Maccabiah is reassessed every four years through "The Budget Law," which determines actual state support based on competing priorities, particularly security matters. Israeli sports funding draws from multiple sources, including state allocations, philanthropy, civic and sports organizations, international companies, and the private sector.<sup>117</sup> The sports sector has historically suffered from insufficient budgeting and inadequate infrastructure investment,<sup>118</sup> independent of the Maccabiah events.

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114 Walla Sports system, "In the presence of Minister Mickey Zohar: The logo of the 25th Maccabiah was launched", Walla Sports, May 18, 2023, <https://sports.walla.co.il/item/3579772>.

115 The 20th Maccabiah", Maccabi World Union (c), accessed November 20, 2024, <https://m20.maccabiah.com/maccabiah/service-legal-agreement>.

116 Amir Peleg, "The Schnorr Olympics: How the Maccabiah Became an Event for the Rich- Investigation", Ynet, November 14, 2021, <https://www.ynet.co.il/sport/article/skeujs6wk>.

117 Valeria Siegel Sheffer, "Changing the game's rules: Gender perspective on Sports' budget in Israel" (Adva Center, 2012), <https://adva.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/sport-site1.pdf>.

118 Shmuel Deklo, "High Court of Justice agrees: Local Government Center will establish a committee to determine procedures for local authority support in sports", Globes, December 6, 1996, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=119959>.

A government decision regarding the 2022 Maccabiah reflected a policy of budget reduction compared to previous years. While the government “welcomed the MWU decision to perform the opening ceremony in Jerusalem, and the other competitions across the country,” it allocated 32.6 million NIS for “holding of international sports gatherings, in a way that will allow adequate support in organizing for the holding of the 21<sup>st</sup> Maccabiah events.”<sup>119</sup>

Regarding the upcoming 2025 Maccabiah Games, the government continues to rely on the “Budget Law” (Section 40A), which enables financial support for specific events through allocations from various government offices.<sup>120</sup> The state is expected to contribute 48 million NIS towards the total Maccabiah budget of 270 million NIS.<sup>121</sup> However, an ongoing debate persists among ministries pledged to participate in state financing, particularly concerning the 10 million increase from 2022.<sup>122</sup>

The Maccabiah’s significance as a source of political influence is further demonstrated by the consistent presence of prime ministers and state presidents at opening ceremonies over the years<sup>123</sup> along with the symbolic relocation of the opening ceremony to Jerusalem – a decision carrying profound Zionist and political meaning. The 2022 Games particularly highlighted this political prominence, featuring appearances by U.S. President Joe Biden, the Israeli prime minister and president, and various international ambassadors.<sup>124</sup> This high-level participation underscores the Maccabiah’s importance as a platform for public visibility, diplomatic engagement, and international sports competitions.

#### 4. THE MACCABIAH GAMES AND NEW SPORTS DIPLOMACY

The Maccabi World Organization exemplifies Murray’s concept of “non-state sporting actors and diplomacy,” with Murray identifying the Maccabiah Games as Israel’s “chief sporting diplomatic vehicle.”<sup>125</sup> Sporting tournaments can help reshape national stereotypes by providing opportunities for nations to celebrate their distinct cultural identity, history, and religion. The Jewish Olympics serves a diplomatic function by unifying the Israeli nation through connections with Jewish communities worldwide.<sup>126</sup> Given the Maccabiah’s reliance on independent operational mechanisms, we contend that Israel’s primary soft power resource has developed, endured, and continues to function through private and civic networks rather than through state direction, financing, or explicit supporting policy. As stated on the Maccabiah website:

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119 Prime Minister’s office, Holding the 21st Maccabiah events in the summer of 2022 Government Decision No. 660 dated December 22, 2022, accessed December 1, 2024, [https://www.gov.il/he/pages/dec660\\_2020](https://www.gov.il/he/pages/dec660_2020).

120 Prime Minister’s office, “Holding the 22nd Maccabiah events in the summer of 2025 Government Decision No. 1910 dated June 26, 2024, accessed December 1, 2024, <https://www.gov.il/he/pages/dec1910-2024>.

121 Stav Livne, “Maccabiah 2025 chairman estimates it will be the largest: “Everyone understands the magnitude of the hour,” *Globes*, August 31, 2024, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001487859>.

122 Gidi Lipkin, “The government owes another 10 million NIS to hold the Maccabiah,” *ONE Sports*, June 14, 2024, <https://www.one.co.il/Article/465275.html>.

123 Kaplan, *Jewish Olympics*.

124 “Twenty-first Maccabiah,” Maccabi World Union (d), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.maccabiah.com/en/?view=article&id=582:twenty-first-maccabiah&catid=41>.

125 Murray, *Sports Diplomacy*, 151.

126 *Ibid*, 151–152.



"The goals of the Maccabi World Movement are to strengthen the Jewish people as a national body, emphasize the centrality of Israel in the life of the Jewish people, and ensure the continuity and strengthening of Jewish communities around the world. All this should be accomplished through extensive community activity in the fields of education, culture, and sports."<sup>127</sup> As Nye emphasizes, soft power resources emerge from a state's national values, manifesting through culture, which he describes as "the set of practices that create meaning for a society," and it has many manifestations. "It is expected to distinguish between high culture, such as literature, art, and education, which appeals to elites, and popular culture, which focuses on mass entertainment."<sup>128</sup> Building on this concept of mass entertainment and popular culture, hosting of major successful sporting events enhances a country's international image by bolstering its soft power resources and establishing sports as a significant tool for foreign policy.<sup>129</sup> As demonstrated in this analysis, no specific legislation exists that governs state support for the Maccabiah Games' Olympic operations. Despite the Games' significant impact on Israel's international standing and soft power resources, the Maccabiah operates primarily through the sports society engagement rather than being established as a national resource. This situation reflects the broader underinvestment in sports and, more specifically, creates an impression of state passivity regarding financial support for the Jewish Olympics.

When examining reasons for the state's limited involvement, one of the most fundamental political explanations applies: actors operate as they do simply because they can. It appears that the Maccabiah will continue its quadrennial cycle regardless of state involvement, as it relies not on state engagement, but on the active participation of the sports community. This situation may partially reflect Gilboa's<sup>130</sup> observation that Israel lacks a coherent policy regarding the utilization and benefits of its soft power while focusing its investments and approaches on hard power.

Despite the elevated costs of hosting such an event in Israel, the MWU emphasizes the Games' significance as part of a broader ideology aimed at connecting Jews in Israel and the diaspora through sports. In doing so, it exemplifies Murray's concept of non-traditional sports diplomacy, which has evolved since the Games' inception in the previous century. While one might expect Israel to leverage the world's largest Jewish sporting event for political interests, a broader perspective reveals that Israel has yet to prioritize cultural investments through legislation and permanent policy-making, largely due to geopolitical considerations.

The consistent presence of state officials at Maccabiah opening ceremonies indicates its recognition as a powerful platform for public relations in the international arena and foreign relations. As the Maccabiah creates an Olympic-style setting, it aligns with other large-scale events that attract political elite attention. According to Abdi et al.,<sup>131</sup> Olympic opening ceremonies serve as a research field for examining how participating states utilize such events for national purposes. Through extensive media coverage, global audiences are exposed to

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127 "What is the Maccabiah?," Maccabi World Union (e), accessed December 15, 2024, <https://m21.maccabiah.com/he/maccabiah/who-we-are>.

128 Nye, "Public Affairs", 96.

129 Grix and Brannagan, "Of Mechanisms", 255.

130 Eitan Gilboa, "Public diplomacy: The missing component in Israel's foreign policy", in *Israel's Strategic Agenda*, ed. Efraim Inbar (London: Routledge, 2013), 102–134, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315878652>.

131 Kamzi Abdi et al., "Identifying sports diplomacy resources as soft power tools". *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 15 (2019): 148, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41254-019-00115-9>.

various representations of each actor's geography, culture, history, and other attributes.

Sports hold greater potential than other cultural domains to effect change and provide a platform for social and political advocacy.<sup>132</sup> They function as "a potent vector of change, value, principle, solidarity, a symbol, means, and arena through which a plurality of views can be listened to."<sup>133</sup> Sports facilitate the goal of uniting people through their shared love of competition while simultaneously serving government policy objectives.<sup>134</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSION

Prior to the 2022 Maccabiah Games, Ben Gurion International Airport hosted a photographic exhibition featuring Jewish and Israeli athletes from the past and present.<sup>135</sup> As sports constitute an element of cultural diplomacy, the placement of this exhibition in such a high-traffic international space demonstrates the socio-political significance of the Jewish Olympics' public image. However, this emphasis on image-building appears to contrast with the Games' relatively low priority in terms of concrete political support and resource allocation.

The state's involvement with each Maccabiah event takes various forms, however, no coherent legal framework exists to govern this quadrennial Olympic competition. Financial participation fluctuates according to the state's budget and its ability to provide necessary support, resulting in unstable resources. The state's primary role manifests through promoting Jewish immigration from the diaspora and branding the event as a Zionist national tradition aimed at unifying Israel with the diaspora.

The Maccabiah exemplifies new sports diplomacy, operating without an assigned state budget allocation while still serving national purposes. This dual nature creates an interesting dynamic: the Games' independence from state support preserves the sports community's autonomy in setting its own goals and ambitions without political subordination. However, while the Maccabiah Games function as a national asset for Israel, minimal state investment shifts the financial burden of participation onto the Jewish sports community and the athletes themselves.

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132 Grant Jarvie, "Sport, soft power and cultural relations", *Journal of Global Sport Management* 9, no. 4 (2021): 670-687, <https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2021.1952093>.

133 Jarvie, "Sports, soft", 10.

134 Murray and Pigman, "Mapping the relationship", 1,101.

135 Ben Goldfreund, "Until August 1: Special exhibition at Ben Gurion Airport in honor of the Maccabiah", *Mako*, May 17, 2022, [https://www.mako.co.il/news-sport/sports\\_others-2022\\_q2/Article-3e423bc2db1d081026.htm](https://www.mako.co.il/news-sport/sports_others-2022_q2/Article-3e423bc2db1d081026.htm).

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