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Israel's Strategic and Tactical Use of the 2017 Maccabiah Games for Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy

Yoav Dubinsky

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Abstract

The Maccabiah Games, also known as “The Jewish Olympics,” are a quadrennial international multisport event that takes place in Israel and is deeply rooted in the Zionist movement. The purpose of this study is to analyze strategies and tactics Israel used in the 2017 Maccabiah Games for nation branding and public diplomacy. Based on ethnographic field research during the Maccabiah Games in July 2017, the authors identified nine different tactics used by the Maccabiah organizations that correlate the strategic goals of the State of Israel. Results have theoretical and practical implications of how countries can use sports events for nation branding and public diplomacy.

Keywords: *Maccabiah Games, Israel, nation branding, public diplomacy*

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyze how Israel used the 2017 Maccabiah Games (Kaplan, 2015), for public diplomacy and nation branding. Following the Olympic Games and the Universiade Games, the Maccabiah Games are the third largest sport event in the world in terms of number of individual participants, number of countries, and the number and variety of sports disciplines (JTA, 2017). Though lacking the financial impact of the FIFA World Cup or the exposure of the Super Bowl, the Maccabiah Games are larger than almost any local, regional, continental, or global sport event. Unlike the Olympic Games and the Universiade Games, which move to different cities, countries, and even continents, the Maccabiah Games are held every four years in Israel. The Maccabiah Games, also known as “The Jewish Olympics” (Kaplan, 2015), are strongly rooted within the Zionist Movement (Galily, 2009), the State of Israel, and the image of Jewish people (Harif, 2011). Through ethnographic research during the 2017 Maccabiah Games, we analyzed the tactical and strategic ways Israel utilized the event for nation branding and public diplomacy.

The 2017 Maccabiah Games were divided into three age categories for the Maccabiah Games: Youth, Open, and Masters (Maccabiah 2017, 2018). This gave the Maccabiah organizers a chance to target each segment of the participants with relevant events and activities. There were events for all the Maccabiah participants together, events for specific delegations, events for age groups and events based on the sports.

Literature Review

The historical roots for the Maccabiah Games can be traced back to the awakening of the Zionist movement in late 19th century Europe (Galily, 2009). The Zionist movement strived to establish a Jewish State in Eretz Israel, the historical homeland of Jewish people. At the Second Zionist World Congress in 1898, Max Nordau coined the phrase “Muscular Judaism” (Kaufman & Galily, 2009). The idea behind “Muscular Judaism” was to change the physical perception of Judaism and create “a new Jew” as an antithesis to the negative stereotype of Jews in the Diaspora (Kaufman & Galily, 2009; Presner, 2007). Muscular Judaism was to inspire the ideal of an active Jew, who works the land, fights, and builds the future home for Jewish people. One of the manifestations of Muscular Judaism was the establishment of Jewish sports clubs in the early 20th century (Galily, 2009). This contributed to forming the umbrella organization Maccabi World Union in 1921 and a multisport event for Jewish people in what was then British-governed Palestine in 1932, called the Maccabiada (later to be named the Maccabiah Games).

Since the foundation of the Zionist movement in the late 19th century, the Maccabiah Games have grown significantly alongside the State of Israel (Galily, 2009). The Maccabiah Games were one of the most important tools of the Zionist Movement, and since 1953 have been held every four years. The Maccabi World Union operates in 70 countries and five continents with approximately 500,000

members (Maccabi World Union, 2018). The organization holds national, regional, and continental Maccabiah Games, including the European Maccabiah Games and the Pan-American Maccabiah Games (Maccabi World Union, 2018). Over the years, the Maccabiah Games have grown in size and become more global with each iteration. In the face of security threats and international political boycotts, the Maccabiah Games bring tens of thousands of tourists to Israel. Thus the event has touristic, cultural, and diplomatic roles in modern Zionism.

With approximately 10,000 participants from approximately 80 countries, competing in over 40 sports in dozens of venues all across the country (JTA, 2017; Maccabi World Union, 2018; Maccabiah 2017, 2018), the 2017 Maccabiah Games were the largest event in its history. Given the 70-year anniversary of the unification of Jerusalem, the organizing committee emphasized the centrality of Jerusalem to Israel. One of the main goals of the Maccabiah Movement is to connect Jewish communities from the Diaspora to the State of Israel. There are multiple Israeli governmental agencies that support and collaborate with Maccabi World Union in this mission. The Israeli government invested 26 million shekels (approximately \$7 million dollars) in the Games and generated revenue of 300 million shekels, approximately \$82 million dollars (Dubinsky, 2018).

The Maccabiah Games have important political and diplomatic functions for Israel, particularly in light of the country's deteriorating image (Avraham, 2009; Gilboa, 2006). According to Gilboa (2006), Israel is the only nation in the world that is constantly under attack for its right to exist. Few countries recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Israel's policies are being compared with those of Apartheid and Nazi Germany (BDS, 2018; Gilboa, 2006). The Israeli government has identified pro-Palestinian campaigns such as Boycotts, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) as strategic threats (Aouragh, 2016). International media have constantly scrutinized Israel (Gilboa, 2006), and some nongovernmental organizations have called for boycotts of events in Israel (Steinberg, 2006). Thus, the 2017 Maccabiah Games had a diplomatic role of connecting international publics to the State of Israel, improving Israel's image, and making athletes ambassadors of the state.

Methods

By attending competitions, ceremonies, other Maccabiah-organized events and trips, the first author collected data through ethnographic field research during the 20th Maccabiah Games between July 4 and July 18, 2017. Press credentials allowed him access to competitions and related events. He kept a daily field journal about the tactics Israel used during the event for nation branding and public diplomacy. After analyzing the transcripts of the journal, the authors identified related activities and tactics and grouped them into nine different themes based on topical similarities (Saldaña, 2016). During the analysis we also grouped concerns and frustrations of the participants, as well as limitations and challenges the Maccabiah Games were facing (see Table 1).

Table 1

Themes, Tactical use, and Strategic Goals for Nation Branding and Public Diplomacy

Theme	Tactical use in the Maccabiah Games	Strategic Goals for the State of Israel
Ceremonies	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Celebrating Israel's 70th year of independence 2. Celebrating 50 years to unification of Jerusalem 3. Using greetings from world leaders 4. Political speeches by Israeli leaders 5. Using Israeli and international songs and dances 6. Using Israeli celebrities 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exposing Israeli culture 2. Strengthening the connection between Jewish Diaspora and State of Israel 3. Emphasizing role of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel
Commemoration and military	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commemorations of Australian victims 2. Commemorations of Israeli terror victims 3. Emphasizing heroism of Paralympians and injured soldiers 4. Holding closing ceremony the Home of the Armor Corps 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Connecting Jewish Diaspora to Israel through collective identity 2. Emphasizing power component in Israel's identity
Tours and cultural events	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Cultural and historical tours in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv 2. Tours to attractions with Zionist significance 3. Exposing Israel culture and history through cultural events 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exposing Israel as a tourism destination 2. Impacting Israel's economy 3. Showing lighter sides of Israel 4. Strengthening connection between the Jewish Diaspora and Israel
Using local products	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using local sponsors 2. Using local providers 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exposing Israeli products 2. Improving local economy

Table 1 (cont.)

Inclusive religious activities	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bar and Bat Mitzvah at the Western Wall 2. Kabbalat Shabbat in Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Connecting the Jewish Diaspora to Israel 2. Emphasizing Israel's diversity 3. Emphasizing the role of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Holding reception for distinguished guests in King David's Tower in Jerusalem 2. A ceremony at Tel-Aviv Museum for Maccabi World Union members and high influential stakeholders 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strengthening political, financial and social ties 2. Expanding the Maccabiah Movement and Maccabiah World Union 3. Intensifying connections to the State of Israel 4. Improving Israel's economy
Integration with the general public	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Night run in Jerusalem 2. Open events in Old Jaffa 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Exposing different sides of Israel 2. Connecting the Jewish Diaspora to Israel
Using athletes as ambassadors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using top former and current athletes as official and an official ambassadors of the Maccabiah 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enriching reputation of the Maccabiah Games
Athletic incentives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Integrating Israeli national championships with Maccabiah competitions 2. Having top Jewish athletes competing 3. Athletes immigrating to Israel 4. Giving non-elite athletes an international experience 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Enriching reputation of the Maccabiah Games 2. Connecting the Jewish Diaspora to Israel

Findings and Discussion

In this section, we discuss the tactics we identified in this study and how Israel and the Maccabiah organization tried to use the games for nation branding and public diplomacy. We also identify some of the challenges and the limitations that the Maccabiah organization was facing, and we discuss them as well.

Ceremonies

Countries hosting Olympic Games use the opening and closing ceremonies to expose their culture and history to international audiences (Arning, 2013). The Maccabiah Games did not target international TV audiences, but mostly the participants, their family members, Israeli fans, and other Maccabiah stakeholders. Similar to the Olympic Games, the ceremonies included historical and cultural references telling the story of the State of Israel, traditional and modern dances and songs, as well as a parade of nations. The focus of the opening ceremony, held in Teddy Stadium in Jerusalem, was celebrating 70 years since the Six Days War in 1967. The Parade of Nations featured video clips of world leaders congratulating the participants. Among the leaders who greeted their delegations were British Prime Minister Theresa May and the Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli President Reuven Rivlin both held speeches in the stadium emphasizing that Israel is the home of all Jewish people and Jerusalem as their capital. According to Gilboa (2006), Israel is one of the only countries in the world whose capital is not officially recognized by the international community. Thus the opening ceremony being held in Jerusalem, the songs and cultural performances about Jerusalem, the centrality of Jerusalem as the main hosting city of the Games, and the speeches by Israel's highest politicians and officials all had a diplomatic purpose. The closing ceremony marked the beginnings of the celebrations of Israel's 70 years of independence. The ceremony, hosted by international Israeli supermodel Bar Refaeli, used international and Israeli music, showing international publics a diverse country looking towards the future. This representation served Israel's nation branding and public diplomacy.

Commemoration and the Military

According to Weiss (1997), commemoration plays a uniting role in Israel's collective identity. By emphasizing a shared past, present, and future, commemorations affirm a bond between the Zionist movement, Jewish communities and the State of Israel. During the 2017 Maccabiah Games, there were several commemoration activities, such as remembering the four Australian athletes who died in the 1995 Maccabiah Games when the Yarkon Bridge collapsed (Galily, 2009), featuring bereaved parents of a former water polo player who died fighting in Operation Protective Edge in 2014, and various mentions of the Munich Massacre and the 11 Israeli athletes, coaches, and referees who had been kidnapped and murdered during the 1972 Olympic Games in West Germany. All these activities have a uniting role of emphasizing the shared bond and fate Jewish people from around the world.

According to Gilboa (2006) and Avraham (2009), the power component plays a significant role in Israel's image since 1967. The Maccabiah Games are a result of "Muscular Judaism," a change of the image of the Jewish person to a proactive one who works the land and fights. Through the games, strength, and power were emphasized through speeches and connections to the Israeli army. Wounded soldiers and Paralympic athletes received a number of honors during the ceremonies. The closing ceremony took place in the Home of the Armor Corps in Latrun surrounded by dozens of tanks. In the venue, various merchandise thanking the Israeli army was for sale. The use of the military, alongside Israeli symbols such as many Israeli flags (First & Avraham, 2007) played a uniting patriotic role in the collective identity of the Maccabiah participants, emphasizing the power component in Israel's identity (Gilboa, 2006) and shaping the branding of Israel (Avraham, 2009).

Tours and Cultural Events

Tourism destination image is an approach in nation branding that evaluates a place as a tourist destination (Anholt, 2010; Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). This includes attributes including the touristic place, the scenery, the history, the culture, the nightlife, and the people. While the center of the 2017 Maccabiah Games was Jerusalem, these games were spread across Israel. To provide a richer image of Israel, Avraham (2009) suggested a branding strategy of using known Israeli symbols, such as famous venues. The organization of the Maccabiah Games has an education department that is responsible for arranging tours for the participants to travel to various places in Israel, including the Dead Sea, Tel-Aviv, and daily tours in Jerusalem. Every participant received a small booklet (Maccabiah 2017, 2017) with vouchers for tours and tickets to different cultural and entertainment events. The various tours exposed participants to diverse sides of Israel. On tours to the north of Israel, participants experienced rafting in the Jordan River and a tour to Jerusalem through the Old City and the Western Wall. The tour guides had been instructed to integrate Zionist values into the tours and to try to promote Aliyah (i.e., immigration of Jewish people to Israel). There were also tours to Tel-Aviv, so participants could experience the beach and nightclubs and thus be exposed to the liberal and secular side of the country (Alfasi & Fenster, 2005). Thus, the tours played a role in Israel's nation branding by showing a diverse and fun country, leaving the participants with experiences beyond the athletic competitions.

Using Local Products

Another area of research in nation branding is product country image, referring to the image of the products associated with the country (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). By using Israeli products and Israeli sponsors such as the bottled water company *Mey Eden*, participants were exposed to Israeli goods. Moreover, the use of local companies generated revenues for the private sector and local businesses. Israel has been trying to brand itself as a start-up nation, an innovative country with high-level technologies (Dubinsky, 2018). This strategy of branding

was reflected during the Maccabiah Games with visits to various companies and meetings between Maccabiah members and Israeli market leaders. The branding of Israel as a start-up nation and a technological powerhouse, however, was not necessarily reflected in the daily organization of games. There were multiple technological issues (e.g., the official website of the 2017 Maccabiah Games not being updated enough). The organizing committee also acknowledged that on the technological side, the organization needs to improve.

Inclusive Religious Activities

The Maccabiah Games are deeply rooted in the Zionist Movement (Galily, 2009), the national movement of Jewish people. Known as “The Jewish Olympics” (Kaplan, 2015), some of the goals of the games are to promote Aliyah and strengthen the connection between the participants and the Jewish religion. The games followed general Jewish traditions by serving Kosher food and not taking place during Shabbat (i.e., between Friday evening and Saturday evening). There are various streams in Judaism, and not all participants practice Judaism the same way. Thus, there were various organized activities that enabled the participants to take part in religious activities without being imposing. Given Jerusalem's religious and historical significance (Alfasi & Fenster, 2005), the most popular activities for participants included holding Bar-Mitzvah and Bat-Mitzvah ceremonies at the Western Wall in Jerusalem (Maccabiah, 2017b). While the Bar-Mitzvah ceremony usually takes place at the age of 13, many of the participants who visited Israel for the first time went through the ceremony at the Western Wall at a much later age. Many participants who visited the Western Wall or went through the ceremony showed strong emotions. The organizers tried to offer a spectrum of religious experiences. For example, at the Western Wall people are expected to behave according to Jewish orthodoxy traditions, including men and women being separated. A more reform-oriented activity was Kabalat Shabbat (a Friday service welcoming the Saturday) at the Tel-Aviv Harbor (Maccabiah, 2017b). Here, Maccabiah participants could experience a religious activity in a less orthodox way. These kind of activities exposed participants to different streams of the Jewish religion, enabling visitors from diverse backgrounds to strengthen their bond to the religion and the State of Israel.

Gala Events

While not as significant in terms of high-level athletic performance, the Masters group includes accomplished individuals in other realms of life. The Master's division offers competitions for various adult age groups, mostly geared toward older participants (Maccabi World Union, 2018). Organizers of the Maccabiah Games wanted these visitors not only to meet other participants, but also key influential figures in Israeli society. The goal was to create collaborations in a variety of areas, including business. Throughout the games there were galas where participants mingled and networked. Examples included evening events at David Tower in Jerusalem or the Tel-Aviv Museum, where several Maccabi

World Union members received honors (Maccabiah, 2017a). At these events, influential participants had the opportunity to meet some of the management of the Maccabiah organizations, key figures in Israel sports, and some Maccabiah legends such as former basketball player Tal Brody. Moreover, organizers created events for the Masters participants to meet with top Israeli stakeholders from the business and political community. Providing the aforementioned events served several purposes: (a) connecting influential participants and local leaders; (b) strengthening political, financial, and social ties; (c) expanding the Maccabiah Movement and Maccabiah World Union; and (d) intensifying connections to the State of Israel.

Integration with the General Public

The character of local people can also shape the image of a country (Buhmann & Ingenhoff, 2015). Thus, management of the Maccabiah Games tactically sought to integrate participants in events open to the general public. The aim was to strengthen connections between Jews from the Diaspora and local people, and thus the State of Israel. Events included a Night Run in Jerusalem which included a 5K, 10K, and half-marathon (Maccabiah 2017, 2017). Unlike the competitions in the Maccabiah, where participants needed to be official members of the delegations and the Israeli delegation usually included active athletes, anyone could register to the Jerusalem Night Run. The run took place in the evening, where Israeli population and Maccabiah participants integrated through an athletic activity, while being exposed to some of the iconic scenery of Jerusalem at night. Other events included street parties in Tel-Aviv and a speed dating night in Old Jaffa.

The speed dating had several branding purposes. The Maccabiah Games have developed a reputation for being an event where Jewish people from all over the world come to find a spouse or have causal romantic relationships. This reputation softens the image of Israel, which benefits Israel strategic attempts to disassociate with an armed dispute (Avraham, 2009). The reputation of finding a spouse was also mentioned in the opening ceremony where a wedding was performed. Moreover, part of the speed dating was dedicated to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Tel-Aviv holds an annual Pride Parade with thousands of tourists coming from all over the world. Holding an event that celebrates LGBT people and Judaism contributes to the branding of Tel-Aviv as a liberal city and to the branding of Israel as a diverse and inclusive country. Through these activities, participants experienced different sides of Israel, including the diverse Israeli society. The Israeli public felt more involved with the Maccabiah Games, while the organization maintained some control on the manner of integration.

Using Athletes as Ambassadors

The Maccabiah organization tried to encourage participants to make Aliyah and to immigrate to Israel, or to become advocates for Israel in their own countries. The Maccabi World Union has an education department responsible for organizing

events in Israel and abroad. The aim is to advocate for Israel in Jewish communities, and thus influence Jews and non-Jews. Ideally, these audiences become unofficial ambassadors of Israel. During the 2017 Maccabiah Games, current and former athletes were also used as ambassadors. Olympic legend Mark Spitz welcomed the American Delegation in a video clip during the Opening Ceremony. Top Israeli athletes were engaged in the ceremonies and in activities around the games. Tal Brody, for example, had made Aliyah to Israel after competing in the Maccabiah Games in the 1960s and led Maccabi Tel-Aviv to European basketball glory. Brody is not only one of the most influential figures in the Maccabiah Movement, but also a Goodwill Ambassador of the State of Israel. Moreover, in every Maccabiah Games, the organizing committee has tried to bring the best active Jewish athletes in the world to compete or as guests. In 2017, American swimmer Anthony Ervin, who won the gold medal in the 50m freestyle event in the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games, lit the Maccabiah torch in the Opening Ceremony and competed in the games winning several medals. With the help of these ambassadors, the prestige of the games increases, more people are exposed to the games and to the Maccabiah Movement, the local community attends competitions, and the event's legacy is enriched.

Athletic Incentives

At the Maccabiah Games, the vast majority of the participants are amateurs. The level of the athletic facilities varies from country clubs, facilities that serve Israeli sports teams as training grounds, arenas where national competitions are held, and stadiums and arenas that host professional international competitions. The athletic achievement is typically far below the professional or elite level, which makes the games more inclusive for participants. One tactic of improving the prestige of the competitions, while making it still inclusive for all levels, was combining the Israeli champions in rhythmic gymnastics and artistic gymnastics with the Maccabiah competitions. This combination allowed non-elite participants to experience an organization of a national championship while competing against some of Israel's top athletes who strive to win the national title.

There are some events and some participants who can find athletic significance in the Maccabiah Games. The swimming competition, for example, was held at the pool at Wingate Institute, the Israeli Sport Center, which is a top-level facility that hosts national and international competitions. The results in the event are professionally measured. There have been examples in the past of athletes, especially with American swimmers, who reached results in the Maccabiah Games that led them to make Aliyah and start representing Israel. This is particularly interesting for Olympic-caliber athletes who fail to qualify for the Olympics, because of the steep competition in their home countries. These athletes have an opportunity to immigrate to Israel because of their Jewish background and represent Israel in international competitions. Having been raised in the United States, Andrea Murez, for example, competed in several Maccabiah Games before making Aliyah

to Israel and representing Israel in World Championships and the 2016 Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games. During the 2017 Maccabiah Games there were several athletes who showed potential of representing Israel in the future.

Challenges and Limitations

There were various challenges and limitations of the way the organizing committee used the 2017 Maccabiah Games for nation branding and public diplomacy. The games received very little national and international exposure in the media. Some participants complained about technological issues (e.g., with the website). Overall, there was very little exposure to Israeli start-up companies (Dubinsky, 2018). Other limitations included the level of competitions, the level of some of the facilities, transportation, and not maximizing the athletic potential of the games. Perhaps, most importantly the Israeli public seemed generally not aware of how, where, and when events took place, resulting in cynicism and indifference by the Israeli public about the need of the Maccabiah Games.

Implications for International Practitioners

While this study focused on Israel and the Maccabiah Games, the findings could benefit other countries, places, or regions who host sport events with strategic goals of improving the country's public diplomacy, nation branding, and eventually the country's image. Several tactics have been used by other countries as well, such as embedding culture and history in opening ceremonies (Arning, 2013), organizing different cultural events and tours, using local products (Dubinsky & O'Reilly, 2012), and using athletes as cultural ambassadors. What is unique about the Maccabiah Games and that international practitioners can implement, is connecting the tactics to overall strategic goals of the country.

The Maccabiah organization implement strategic planning, implementation and control stages, ever analyzing the Games, being aware of the limitations, targeting different segments of their target audiences and striving for improvement in the next games. While some of the tactics might be unique to Israel, a marketing plan that embodies a planning stage, an implementation one and an evaluation (Grewal & Levy, 2019) can be implemented anywhere. For example, practitioners from other countries could learn from the Maccabiah how to target different segments of their target audience, such as youth or older athletes and create activities that fit their specific needs.

Yet, arguably the most important lesson when it comes to public diplomacy and nation branding is the connection between the organizing committee of the sport event and the country's government. For nation branding and public diplomacy strategies and tactics to be successful, they need to be rooted in policies and actual characteristics of the country (Cull, 2010). In the case of the Maccabiah and Israel, there is an overwhelming support by the Israeli government, followed by other sports organizations. This is a unique collaboration in Israel, as many sports organizations argue that they are not involved with Israeli public diplomacy on a

regular basis (Dubinsky, 2018). The Maccabiah Games are rooted in “Muscular Judaism” (Galily, 2009), in the State of Israel (Kaufman & Galily, 2009), and in Jewish identity (Harif, 2011; Hotam, 2015). International practitioners should learn from the success of the Maccabiah that have a long, sustainable impact, the organization and the state need to form relations that are based on mutual goals. Once the unique strategic goals are established in the foundation of the relations, then relevant tactics could be implement.

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