

Beyond the Headlines: The Anti-Israeli Campaign in Football and Its Implications

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the anti-Israeli campaign within international football, which escalated following the 7 October 2023 Hamas attack and Israel's subsequent military actions in Gaza. The study examines the content of these messages and their different implications for international club and national team contexts. It specifically focuses on the "Show Israel the Red Card" campaign, launched by Celtic fans, and the communications from the Norway Football Federation in the context of a World Cup qualification game between the national teams of Norway and Israel. An analysis reveals that specific messages in club-level campaigns contain clear antisemitic patterns. Consequently, the display of some banners goes beyond what can be justified by fans' political stances or their solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Norway's case illustrates the asymmetrical advocacy pursued to ban Israel from international football. The research underlines that the logic of these campaigns and their relevant communication should be based on a prior analysis of the chronological sequence of events and their causal relationships. Otherwise, inflammatory rhetoric creates a toxic atmosphere off the pitch.

Keywords: football, Israel, Palestine, sanctions, political communication

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Introduction

On 7 October 2023, Israel faced a terrorist attack launched by Hamas and affiliated militants that resulted in the deaths of approximately 1,200 people and the hostage-taking of 251 persons (Gritten, 2025). These atrocities were planned, unprecedentedly brutal, accompanied by sexual violence and mutilation, and involved the widespread use of social media to promote their documented activities (World Jewish Congress, 2025). The scale of terror and its impact on Israeli society is evidenced by the fact that it was "the largest single massacre of Jewish people since the Holocaust, and the deadliest per capita terrorist attack, with just over 1 in every 10,000 Israelis killed" (APPG UK-Israel, 2025, p. 7). In response to this act of terror, Israel launched a military campaign against Palestinian militants in Gaza. While this campaign aimed to ensure Israel's security, it also resulted in significant civilian suffering and destruction in Gaza, which sparked considerable international criticism of Israel's actions.

Sport, especially football as the most popular one, has emerged as a battleground in this context. Attempts to ban Israel from international football competitions began as early as Spring 2024. These efforts originated from the Palestinian Football Association. Its officials appealed to FIFA, claiming that developments in Gaza constituted “an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe” and “a live televised genocide” (Nabbi, 2024). In Europe, the inception of this campaign is largely attributable to the supporters of Glasgow's Celtic F.C., one of Scottish football's powerhouses, known for their long-standing pro-Palestinian stance (Bradley, 2024). On 12 February 2025, during their home Champions League match against FC Bayern Munich, they unveiled a banner reading “Show Israel the Red Card” (Anis, 2025). The campaign employed visual and rhetorical messages to highlight the cause of banning Israel from international competitions. This initiative was then quickly adopted by supporters of other football clubs across Europe and internationally. Pro-Palestinian tifos and gestures spread also to the official international games involving Israeli national football team.

This paper aims to analyze the messages of campaigns advocating for the ban of Israeli teams from international competitions. It addresses the divergence in the implications of these campaigns when applied to international club games and those involving national football teams. Hence, the paper is structured as follows: it first provides a brief contextual explanation and discusses the relevant legal terms that frequently appear in pro-Palestinian appeals to ban Israel. Subsequently, it examines the implications for official international club competitions and national team tournaments under the auspices of UEFA.

Contextual Explanations

Although football is a popular sport, two key issues should be explained here. The first deals with the grounds that can lead to the ban of a national team from international competitions, along with relevant historical precedents. The second explains its relevance for European football, specifically why Israel is a UEFA member. Regarding the FIFA World Cup, there have been only 17 cases where a country was suspended from participation (Altimas, 2025). Most of these suspensions stemmed from governmental interference in the affairs of the local football federation. Although many FIFA member states are not democracies, the formal autonomy of their local football federations is a prerequisite for their national teams and clubs to compete internationally. Indeed, there are only a few instances where a country's ban from the FIFA World Cup was a direct result of their domestic or international policies that caused widespread international effect. The most notable historical examples illustrating this include Germany and Japan in 1950, whose exclusion stemmed from their roles as perpetrators of WWII, and South Africa, which was barred from the World Cup from 1970 to 1990 due to its state-sanctioned domestic apartheid policies (Altimas, 2025). A more recent example is Russia. Following the launch of its full-scale aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, all Russian national teams and clubs were prohibited from official international competitions. Consequently, the potential success of the initiative to ban Israel would equate it with the above examples.

Israel was initially a member of the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) until 1974, when it was expelled following numerous Arab and Muslim nations' refusal to compete against it. From 1991, UEFA began integrating Israel: its national team was first allowed to compete, followed by its clubs from 1992, with full membership achieved by 1994 (Nestler, 2024). Consequently, Israeli national teams and clubs regularly compete internationally with their European counterparts under the UEFA umbrella. This affiliation and the frequency of these encounters partially explain why Europe became central to the campaign advocating for a ban on Israel from international football.

Main Concepts and Their Discursive Application

In public debates concerning this issue, three important concepts frequently emerge: genocide, aggression, and antisemitism. While each of these can easily become a clickbait tool, their political meanings often have blurred and quite abstract interpretative boundaries. This is rather different from their more precise legal definitions. This distinction often remains unclear for audiences consuming these messages. When dealing with civic activism campaign messages and their media portrayal, an audience should be aware of what deed caused what reaction. This cause-effect relationship is necessary to assess whether activists, and subsequently the media, fully address these developments or simply take sides to express their political or social views and goals. Therefore, it is crucial to provide an overview of these three concepts and their various aspects.

Genocide

The concept of genocide emerged as quite a popular tool in media coverage of historical and contemporary atrocities. The term's widespread application means it can be used so broadly that audiences may either misunderstand its true meaning or adapt it for their own agendas. Essentially, the emotional power of this term makes it an effective instrument for campaigners seeking to provoke reactions and draw attention to their causes. Nevertheless, its legal framework remains distinct and is formally outlined in the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Within this context, genocide is precisely defined as “acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,” specifying five actions detailed within the convention (United Nations, 1948). The Convention text clearly explains them. They are not listed here, as interested readers can consult the Convention directly. What should be emphasized, however, is the extensive criticism this definition has attracted since its adoption. Some argue that it is excessively narrow, while others contend that “it is devalued by overuse” (BBC News, 2022).

The central question regarding the situation in Gaza since October 2023 is whether Israel's actions were driven by an intention to eradicate Palestinians as a distinct group. Proponents who argue for this classification, including United Nations experts (Gritten & Foulkes, 2025) and various human rights organizations, frequently recall the statements made by Israeli officials, which they interpret as dehumanizing and indicative of “genocidal intent” (O'Brien et al., 2025). However, these groups often overlook or give less attention to the rhetoric from Hamas officials, who have consistently advocated for the “annihilation of Israel” and characterized the 7 October massacre as resulting from “complications on the ground” (Haaretz, 2023). Consequently, it is not unreasonable to designate Hamas's activities against Israel and its people as “an example of genocidal intent” and to view Israel's actions as self-defense (American Jewish Committee, 2025). This divergence in legal assessments reveals how lobbying, advocacy, and politics can shape public discourse. Therefore, a comprehensive assessment of these events requires understanding their chronological development and causal relationships.

Aggression

Similarly to the concept of genocide, the definition of aggression has clear legal parameters established at the UN level. The UN General Assembly resolution 3314, adopted on 14 December 1974, designates aggression as “the use of armed force by a State against the sovereignty, territorial integrity or political independence of another State.” While the document further specifies particular acts of aggression, readers can familiarize themselves with these details independently. What is important in this context is that this definition was largely a compromise (Wilmshurst, 2008), resulting in limited effectiveness, as its provisions were frequently ignored by the UN Security Council (Dinstein, 2015). The resolution's preamble also contains the phrase that “although the question whether an act of aggression has been committed must be considered in the light of all the circumstances of each particular case” (United Nations, 1974). Consequently, the interpretation of these legal provisions is frequently determined by the relevant political contexts of each specific case. However, this phrase also calls for an examination of causal relationships and chronological developments. The post-2023 Gaza developments adhere to this logic because media discourse and activist campaign messages often amplify the discrepancy between the legal and political contexts of the concept of aggression to achieve greater visibility or attract more attention to their cause.

Antisemitism

While there is no universally legally binding definition of antisemitism, the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA) version is worth mentioning. This IHRA non-legally binding working definition of antisemitism (2016) characterizes antisemitism as “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews.” In the European context, the practicality of this definition is backed by the European Commission, which considers it “a benchmark for promoting a human rights-based and victim-centred approach to fight antisemitism” (*Definition of antisemitism*, n.d.) The IHRA definition is further explained through specific examples. These include denying the Jewish people their right to self-determination, applying double standards to Israel by requiring behavior not expected of other democratic nations, or drawing comparisons between

contemporary Israeli policy and that of the Nazis. Israel can be criticized for its policies in the same manner as any other nation without such expressions being antisemitic. However, if Israel is targeted specifically as a Jewish entity, such verbal or physical attacks can be considered antisemitic.

This logic implies that while legitimate criticism of Israel and its authorities on certain issues is a normal democratic practice, much like that directed at other states, a more nuanced approach is required for sensitive topics. Specifically, when addressing Israel's right to self-defense, its existence as an independent state, the protection of its citizens, and its efforts to counter terrorism, it is crucial that all relevant factors and their chronological order are carefully considered. Ideally, this should also occur without the high levels of emotion typically accompanying such issues.

Anti-Israeli campaign and its messages

There is a difference between official competitions in which clubs and national teams participate. Club competitions are more frequent and encompass not only official international tournaments but also multi-tier domestic leagues and cup competitions. Consequently, each country has numerous football clubs. These vary widely in terms of success levels, financial capacities, and fanbase sizes. Their fans, however, are a driving force behind their support and are frequently organized into ultra groups. These groups are socially active and often align with diverse political views and social values. This alignment usually stems from the historical roots of their respective fanbases. It is also important to distinguish between a football club as a legal entity and its ultra groups. Despite their interactions, it is not uncommon for fans to conflict with club administration over certain issues. Moreover, clubs often have limited capacity to influence the visual and vocal content of ultra performances at the stadium and beyond. In other words, ultras activism does not always reflect the club's official position. However, many issues are coordinated, at least informally.

Football club tournaments

As mentioned earlier, the mass campaign at European stadiums to ban Israel from international official football competitions can be traced to the game on 12 February 2025 in Glasgow. During this match, where Celtic hosted Bayern Munich as part of the UEFA Champions League tournament, Celtic fans unveiled a banner reading "Show Israel the Red Card."

The Celtic fanbase's identity is rooted in political and social perspectives that explicitly view British-Irish history as conquest and colonization, alongside related anti-racist and anti-imperialist sentiments. This understanding stems from the fanbase's origins, historically formed by descendants of Irish immigrants or refugees who frequently faced discrimination in Scotland, often due to their Irish Catholic and working-class backgrounds (Bradley, 2024, p. 595). Celtic fans see their engagement with the Palestinian cause as reflecting parallels with their community's history, identity, and articulated values of social justice, resulting in their actions intended to raise public awareness to the issue (uncivilized, 2023). Interestingly, this pro-Palestinian stance of its fanbase never prevented Celtic management from signing several prominent Israeli football players of both Jewish and Arab ethnic backgrounds.

The available accounts confirm that the Palestinian flag has been present among the symbols that Celtic's fanbase displayed for nearly three decades, including on occasions when their team played in UEFA club tournaments against Israeli sides, such as Hapoel Tel Aviv in late 2009 or Hapoel Be'er Sheva in August 2016 (Bradley, 2024, p. 589). In 2009, their presence could be described as "not large-scale," yet the 2016 tifo resulted in UEFA imposing a €10,000 fine on the club for the use of illicit political banners (Barry, 2020). This support went beyond stadium performances and resulted in several long-standing charity and sport initiatives in and for Palestine.

The "Show Israel the Red Card" banner was displayed by the Green Brigade, a Celtic supporters' group, in Glasgow on 12 February 2025. This action went beyond simple solidarity with the Palestinian cause. Its visual elements and messages conveyed more specific criticisms.

Firstly, the Green Brigade's leaflets accused Israel of genocide, ethnic cleansing, apartheid, and illegal occupation of Palestinian territories. Secondly, the banner itself showed the word "Israel" in quotation marks. Additionally, the country's name appeared to be dripping in blood (Celtic Fan Content RonnieJ67, 2025). Overall, these

accusations align with positions held by many pro-Palestinian activist groups and offer an interpretation of events that largely dismisses pro-Israeli arguments.

The blood drops could suggest a protest against excessive force and its victims. However, combined with the leaflet's wording, they become accusations of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Again, this perspective offers no consideration for the Israeli viewpoint, as it fails to consider all relevant factors and their chronological order.

More significantly, writing "Israel" in quotation marks clearly denies its legitimate right to exist as an independent state and implicitly neglects historical connection between Jews and the Land of Israel. It also disregards the Israeli population's right to self-defense against continuous terrorist threats. In essence, the Green Brigade's message contained clear antisemitic patterns. Its distribution to other stadiums therefore presented a potential for this kind of interpretation.

The campaign's distribution to other stadiums in Europe and beyond revealed additional problematic aspects. A video uploaded to the Green Brigade's YouTube channel on 5 May 2025, titled "Show Zionism the Red Card," illustrates this. It provides an overview of groups that joined the initiative and the banners they displayed. The Green Brigade's (2025) video documents its members displaying slogans like "Show Israeli Genocide the Red Card" and "Show Zionism the Red Card." The video's title also indicates official approval of these initiatives by the ultra supporters group. While the first slogan aligns with pro-Palestinian agendas and disregards pro-Israeli arguments, the second displays clear antisemitic patterns. Zionism can be defined in various ways. However, it is essentially "a movement for (originally) the re-establishment and (now) the development and protection of a Jewish nation in what is now Israel" (Zionism, 2024). Therefore, calls for its removal imply a delegitimization (and eventually elimination) not only of Israel as a state but also of Jews as a distinct group. It is debatable how much the fans displaying these banners understand this context. Nevertheless, such slogans sound antisemitic, regardless of the original intentions behind them. This campaign significantly increased the visibility of anti-Israeli rhetoric at football stadiums. Performances by other fans throughout Europe and beyond, within the framework of the pro-Palestinian cause, also had different implications. The same video by the Green Brigade (2025) features some of these banners.

For example, fans of Orlando Pirates from Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, South Africa, displayed banners showing a crossed-out Israeli flag within a red circle. Meanwhile, fans of the Italian side US Livorno, known for their left-wing political views, used a banner with the inscription "Kick them out" and a figure kicking an Israeli flag. Although these groups likely intended to call for banning Israeli teams and clubs from international competitions, their visual content carries a dubious message. These messages can be interpreted as antisemitic, suggesting a call to denounce Israel and exclude Jewish people. Again, these manifestations blur the line between appeals and potential actions.

An even more outrageous example comes from fans of the Spanish side Osasuna from Pamplona. During their team's match against Getafe in the Spanish top-flight league on 3 October 2025, they displayed a banner that read in Basque, "Israel Suntsitu," meaning "Destroy Israel" (Ynet Global, 2025). Messages of this type are clearly antisemitic. They cannot be excused by political views or passionate support for the Palestinian cause. Moreover, such messages should be penalized under Article 510 of the Spanish Criminal Code, which bans and punishes incitement to hatred, discrimination, or violence against a group or individuals based on their characteristics.

Similarly dubious messages include banners showing a face covered with a Palestinian *keffiyeh*. While fans displaying this might intend it as an act of solidarity with the Palestinian cause, it can also be interpreted as glorifying terrorist activities committed by Hamas and condemning Israel's antiterrorist actions.

A further implication is evident in the recent ban on Maccabi Tel Aviv fans attending a Europa League away football game against Aston Villa in Birmingham on 6 November 2025. This decision, made under relevant procedural rules, stemmed from West Midlands Police concerns about their capacity to manage potential protests related to the situation in Gaza. Police qualified the game as high-risk. Notably, their statement cited the 2024 Europa League game in Amsterdam between local powerhouse Ajax and Maccabi. Police mentioned "violent clashes and hate crime offences" occurring then, contending this measure would "mitigate risks to public safety" (Sky Sports, 2025). This reasoning appears dubious. On the one hand, Maccabi ultras often present challenges for police. However, they do not significantly differ from other groups of this kind. On the other hand, Ajax is one of Europe's most prominent clubs, known for its strong connection to Jewish identity. Before the

match, the Maccabi website explained the link between Maccabi and Ajax fans (Maccabi Tel Aviv, 2024). However, the issue stemmed from events outside the stadium, where Maccabi fans clashed with pro-Palestine demonstrators, resulting in over 60 arrests (Sky Sports, 2025).

The UK government criticized this decision and affirmed it would intervene to overturn it. Meanwhile, the Israeli Embassy to the UK expressed regret that “extremists have turned football, a sport meant to unite, into a platform for intimidation, driving Jewish and Israeli fans away from UK stadiums” (Roan, 2025). Maccabi, however, announced its decision to decline all tickets allocated for visiting fans. In its statement, the club asserted that its supporters travel across Europe without incident, dismissing any suggestion of fan misconduct as a distortion of reality and a mere pretext for the ban. The club further noted that its fans, and the Jewish community, are well-acquainted with such tactics and their potential implications. It added that “hate-filled falsehoods” have created “a toxic atmosphere,” raising serious doubts about fan safety, and concluded that “Inflammatory rhetoric, trafficking in half-truths is never healthy, but in this particular case the remarks being generated are of the most concerning variety” (Maccabi Tel Aviv, 2025).

Overall, the actions of football fans at the club level significantly raised the public's visibility of the Gaza conflict and advanced pro-Palestine narratives. The messages they displayed frequently expressed harsh criticism of Israel and often revealed clear patterns of antisemitism, including the delegitimization of Israel as an independent state. Furthermore, these messages disregarded any argumentation from the Israeli side. This, in turn, makes reasonable the Israeli entities' claims regarding a toxic atmosphere and inflammatory rhetoric based on half-truths.

National team football competitions

The games between national teams substantially differ from club competitions. They typically unite football fans from the same country, even those supporting archrival clubs, who often hold diverse political views and come from varied social settings. More importantly, the national football team represents the country in international competitions and is formed by a country's football association. Local football associations are autonomous entities primarily aimed at promoting this sport. However, public authorities of each state have varying degrees of power to control their activities, and this can significantly differ from country to country (CJEU, 2020). Consequently, the policies adopted by a football association on specific political matters typically align with those of the country's authorities.

The alignment of the football federation's activities with its government's position regarding the conflict in Gaza can be exemplified by the FIFA World Cup qualifying game between the national teams of Norway and Israel, which took place in Oslo on 11 October 2025. Norwegian authorities described this as the most high-security sports event in the country since it hosted the 1994 Winter Olympics (Times of Israel, 2025). Available accounts indicate that the Norwegian Football Federation (NFF) was the only federation to publicly join the Palestinian Football Association in its campaign to ban Israel from international competitions (Buckingham, 2025). Its chairwoman, Lise Klaveness, openly compared Israel with Russia, arguing that if one is banned, the other should also be excluded, though she emphasized this was her personal view (Buckingham, 2025).

Well in advance of the game, the NFF also decided that all income from the match would be transferred to humanitarian organizations in Gaza. Klaveness justified this by saying that the NFF “cannot have an indifferent attitude toward the humanitarian suffering and the disproportionate attacks the civilian population in Gaza has been subjected to for a long time” (Norges Fotballforbund, 2025). Elsewhere, she also claimed that it is not an anti-Israeli motion but “an element of “a rule-based system” (Times of Israel, 2025). The Israeli Football Association reminded their Norwegian counterparts about the 2023 events, stating that it would appreciate it “if some of the amount were directed to try to find a condemnation by the Norwegian FA of the October 7 massacre that claimed the lives of hundreds of Israeli citizens and children” (Times of Israel, 2025). In turn, Klaveness condemned these attacks but claimed that those affected did not require financial aid from Norway (Buckingham, 2025). Before the game, approximately 1,000 pro-Palestinian protesters marched to Ullevaal Stadium, displaying flags, flares, and Gaza-related banners, alongside chants of “Shut down the embassy.” Inside, a large Palestinian flag and a “Let Children Live” banner were displayed, with some fans booing the Israeli national anthem and showing symbolic red cards (CNN Sports, 2025).

One can agree with Norway head coach Ståle Solbakken's summary that the game became "special for reasons other than sports" (Middle East Monitor, 2025). It is evident that the NFF transformed a well-organized game into a public message of solidarity with the Palestinian cause. This raises two points that require attention.

First, appealing to a rule-based system and directly comparing Israel and Russia is, at the very least, questionable. This is due to the fundamentally different natures of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The only similarity is that hostilities in both situations affect civilians en masse and cause numerous victims. Yet, while Russian actions in Ukraine were undeniably aggressive from the outset, Israeli operations in Gaza stemmed from the unprecedented traumatic experience of the 7 October 2023 terrorist attack conducted by Hamas. Even though many might interpret Israel's reaction as excessively disproportionate, such public performances and messages from football officials could provoke anti-Israeli and antisemitic sentiments, further contributing to a toxic atmosphere around football games and escalating potential tensions off the pitch.

Second, taking sides in any conflict is a common human practice. Yet, it is important that the arguments from both sides of this conflict are heard, alongside a chronological understanding of events and their causal relationships. In Israel's case, one often observes labeling with little to no contextual assessment. The NFF's approach and its messages are based not on the assessment of the reasons for the situation, but merely on its outcomes, presented in a black-and-white duality. In other words, it seems more important for them to sympathize with Palestinians as victims. In turn, the assessment of Israeli actions focuses predominantly on the outcomes, with little attention to the reasons that prompted such responses. Yet, the NFF and similar organizations should beware that even good intentions of this kind can lead to unforeseen negative consequences.

Conclusions

The Football fans have historically been active societal elements in various countries. Highly organized, they have used stadiums as a platform to visually and vocally address specific domestic and international developments. The events following between Israel and Palestine after the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October 2023, became a consistent topic raised by fans at various stadiums and off the pitch. Consequently, it was the football fans who significantly contributed to the public and media visibility of this issue. This was achieved not only through the messages they displayed, but also by using the considerable media attention given to domestic and international football competitions.

The campaign "Show Israel the Red Card," launched by Celtic fans, historically known for their pro-Palestinian stance, demonstrated the potential effectiveness of such initiatives. This campaign was widely distributed among fans of other football clubs across Europe and beyond, who further promoted the pro-Palestinian cause through stadium performances and various other activities. The overwhelming dominance of the pro-Palestinian narrative in this context suggested a clear defeat for Israel in promoting its own arguments. However, it is arguable whether Israel's argumentation could have gained any acceptance, as this campaign relies on a "taking sides" logic rather than an analysis of the chronological sequence of events and their causal relationships.

This skepticism is supported by a content analysis of the campaign's messages. As previously illustrated, some of these messages exhibited clear patterns of antisemitism, calling for the denial of Israel's right to exist and the exclusion of Jewish people and their identity. The visual content of at least some banners cannot be justified by the fans' political views or their overt support for the Palestinian cause. Overall, their rhetoric could be interpreted as inflammatory and also create a toxic atmosphere off the pitch.

At the national team level, the implications differ when a national football federation becomes a part of the puzzle. Generally, a national football association's stance on specific political issues reflects those of its national government. As the case of Norway illustrates, its football federation's seemingly good intentions led to a skewed advocacy when it vocally pushed for banning Israeli teams from international football competition. The NFF's approach and its communications primarily focused on the observable outcomes of the developments in Gaza, rather than an overarching consideration of its causes. The NFF did repeatedly condemn Hamas's terrorist attack on 7 October. However, its officials frequently presented the outcomes of the post-2023 developments through a binary, black-and-white framing. As discussed in the text, the direct comparison between Israel and

Russia under a FIFA rule-based system is arguably problematic. Regardless of whether Israel's actions are widely interpreted as disproportionate, public expressions and announcements from football officials could inadvertently fuel anti-Israeli and antisemitic sentiments. This, in turn, could lead to a toxic environment surrounding football games and increase tensions off the pitch. Still, football's main purpose is to be a tool that brings people together.

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