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## The two faces of the Olympics

Olympics double standards? Russian and Belarusian athletes are barred from the Paris games, while genocidal Israel gets a free pass, and Chinese athletes get bullied in broad daylight. It is no wonder the event is being called ‘the worst Olympics ever.’



(Photo

Credit: The Cradle)

The Olympics are celebrated as a politics-free international sporting event that unites people from all corners of the globe. In reality, however, politics have always cast a shadow over the games, marked by scandals, protests, and boycotts – and, in the cases of previous hosts Russia and China, accusations of “[sportswashing](#).”

This year, the political undertones are particularly pronounced, with deeply unsettling double standards applied to Israel.

Athletes from Russia and Belarus are [excluded](#) from participating in the Paris Games under their national flags because of their part in the Ukraine conflict. They can take only part under a [neutral](#) banner. But despite Tel Aviv's live-streamed genocide taking place in Gaza for the past 10 months, no Israeli athletes have been barred from participating under the occupation state's flag.

Worldwide calls for excluding Israel from this year's Olympics have fallen on deaf ears. This, despite the fact that, in January, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) [found](#) it is "plausible" that Israel is guilty of violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.

The following month, Amnesty International [assessed](#) that "Israel has failed to take even the bare minimum steps to comply" with the ICJ's orders to take "immediate and effective measures" to protect Palestinians in Gaza from the risks of genocide.

In May, International Criminal Court (ICC) Chief Prosecutor Karim Khan [announced](#) that he had requested arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Yoaz Gallant on charges of crimes against humanity and war crimes in Gaza.

The ICJ, which is the UN's top court, also reaffirmed in an [advisory opinion](#) last month that Israel's control of Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem amounts to Apartheid.

### **Ignoring mountains of evidence**

Despite the substantial evidence of Israel being a rogue actor that flagrantly violates basic tenets of international law, International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach rejected a request from the Palestine Olympic Committee (POC) to ban Israel from participating in the games.

The POC's letter to the IOC president [stressed](#) that "Palestinian athletes, particularly those in Gaza, are denied safe passage and have suffered significantly due to the ongoing conflict." But Bach [replied](#) that he refuses to be pulled into "political business."

French President Emanuel Macron also [opposed](#) barring Israel, even as voices like Thomas Portes, a member of the French parliament from the left-wing La France Insoumise, [argued](#) that Israel should face the same sanctions as Russia and Belarus.

Speaking at a rally last week, Portes [declared](#) that the Israeli delegation "is not welcome in Paris" and that "Israeli sportspeople are not welcome at the Paris Olympic Games." The lawmaker [added](#):

**France’s diplomats should pressure the International Olympic Committee to bar the Israeli flag and anthem, as is done for Russia.**

There was a predictable backlash against Portes’s statements, although other French legislators such as Aurelien Le Coq, Jerome Legavre, and Manuel Bompard came to Portes’ [defense](#).

To put Israeli crimes into perspective, its military has been responsible for at least [39,363](#) deaths and approximately [90,923](#) injuries in less than 10 months. Among the death toll are at least [15,000](#) children. In a shocking report published in the scientific journal [The Lancet](#) on 5 July, physicians and public health experts estimated that Israel’s assault on Gaza could lead to between 149,000 and 598,000 Palestinian deaths *if it were to end immediately*.

Today, much of Gaza is a no-man’s land. In comparison, according to the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, the civilian death toll in the first two years of the Ukraine war reached [10,582](#). While the outrage over human suffering in Ukraine is justified, it is challenging to argue that Russia and Belarus deserve to be barred, but Israel does not.

As Dr Assal Rad, a scholar of Modern Middle Eastern history, tells *The Cradle*:

**The irony is that Israel is ‘singled out’ in its ability to act with impunity. Israel’s crimes in Gaza are brutal and extensive, including plausible genocide – the worst possible crime against humanity – yet Israel has faced zero consequences. To the contrary, the US has provided more weapons and funds for Israel to continue committing atrocities despite global outrage. In doing so, the US has shown the futility of the international system by making it a tool of power rather than justice or fairness.**

**‘Olympic values’ or western values?**

The Olympic Charter emphasizes that the games are intended to promote a way of life based on “respect for internationally recognized human rights and universal fundamental ethical principles.” Allowing Israel to participate makes a mockery of this charter.

Excluding Israel from the Olympic Games because it is an apartheid state would not be without historic precedent. Apartheid South Africa’s infringement of the Olympic Charter resulted in its being [barred](#) from participating in the games in 1964 and 1968, before being entirely [expelled](#) in 1970. In 1972, the IOC [barred](#) the team representing Rhodesia before its [exclusion](#) in 1976.

The IOC’s unwillingness to hold Israel to the same standards applied to other countries speaks to “western hypocrisy at its finest,” Ghada Oueiss, a Lebanese journalist, tells *The Cradle*.

Dr Rad adds: “Western double standards have been on full display for the world to see over the last nearly 10 months as Israel has been given total impunity in its war on Gaza. The decision to ban Russia and Belarus while allowing Israel to compete is yet another example of this hypocrisy.”

**Whatever your views on politics and sports or banning athletes from competition, what is at issue here is that the rules do not apply equally across the board. Russia is ‘held accountable’ because it is an adversary of the United States, while Israel is held to a different standard because it is an ally. These double standards contribute to undermining the very systems the west so often champions with its words but not its deeds.**

### **‘Ekecheiria’**

The Paris Olympics opened on 26 July with a [controversial](#) grand ceremony performance widely perceived as mocking religious beliefs. The scene in question featured drag queens and a tableau some interpreted as a parody of Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper.” Organizers denied this interpretation, claiming instead that the scene depicted was inspired by Greek mythology to celebrate diversity and French gastronomy.

This portrayal sparked outrage and [condemnation](#) from various religious leaders and groups worldwide. Egypt’s esteemed Al-Azhar University called the performance “insulting” and “barbaric,” warning against using global events to normalize insults to religion and promote what they termed “destructive societal diseases.”

The Coptic Orthodox Church also condemned the performance, describing it as a “serious insult” to Christian beliefs and calling for a formal apology from the organizers. [Additional criticisms](#) came from the Middle East Council of Churches, the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, and the Muslim Council of Elders.

In response to the backlash, the organizers of the Paris 2024 Olympics issued an [apology](#) to those offended, insisting that the intention was not to show disrespect but to promote community tolerance and inclusion.

Yet talk of “inclusion” or “exclusion” appears to be incredibly subjective at the IOC – allowing an apartheid state like Israel to compete in the prestigious event while excluding a UN Security Council permanent member state.

On the same day as the opening ceremony, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres [urged](#) all countries “to lay down their arms” and respect the Olympic Truce’s spirit.

The Olympic Truce (*ekecheiria*) is an ancient Greek tradition that the IOC [renewed](#) in 1992 and has been reaffirmed in UN General Assembly [resolutions](#). It demands that all hostilities

around the world cease seven days before the Olympic and Paralympic Games and do not resume until at least seven days after the event concludes.

But for the orphaned, starved, displaced, widowed, dismembered, and traumatized people of Gaza, Guterres' lofty rhetoric about "peace for all" could not be more disconnected from their daily struggles as Israel's high-tech slaughter makes the enclave uninhabitable.

That the IOC has demonstrated its indifference to Palestinian lives is merely the latest reminder of the international community's failure to defend Palestinians. It is a depressing commentary on the IOC that after nearly 10 months of Israel's criminal conduct in Gaza, its athletes can arrive in Paris and compete under the Israeli flag as if they represent a normal country.

While the IOC refuses to uphold its tradition of ekecheiria, that burden has fallen on athletes and spectators attending the Paris Games – one they have carried well – with [reports](#) of athletes withdrawing from matches against Israeli opponents, players being booed and anthems jeered.

Nothing less should suffice at these Paris games, which have already been [branded](#) online as "the worst Olympics ever."

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