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Out of Bounds: Israel, European Football, and the Making of Continental Belonging

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This article uses Israel's prolonged effort to join the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) to examine how post-war Europe negotiated the institutional and symbolic boundaries of continental belonging. Drawing on FIFA archives, diplomatic correspondence, and Hebrew-language media, it traces how football became a stage where affiliation was both asserted and tested by those seeking entry and those empowered to grant it. UEFA's rejection of Israel was framed in geographic terms, yet its eventual inclusion followed neither territorial logic nor legal reform, but a quiet politics of accommodation: informal gestures, deferred decisions and precedent-setting exceptions. Within Israel, the campaign served as a proxy for broader debates over the country's geopolitical direction between Asia and Europe. By linking institutional deliberations to domestic discourse, the article argues that Europe's post-war map took shape less through design than through the incremental negotiation of memory, strategy and symbolic positioning.

In April 1978, Israel found itself both embraced and excluded by Europe. That month, the Israeli artist Izhar Cohen won the Eurovision Song Contest, securing one of the country's most visible cultural triumphs on a European stage. Days later, however, the Israeli Football Association's (IFA) application to join the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), the continent's football governing body, was formally rejected. A caricature published in the Hebrew daily *Maariv* captured the dissonance with understated bite: a building marked 'Europe' showed a singer entering through the Eurovision door, while a footballer, holding a rejection slip, exited through UEFA.¹ The image distilled a larger tension that would define Israel's continental positioning for the next two decades: granted partial institutional access, yet excluded from high-profile arenas – like UEFA – that conferred symbolic legitimacy.

This moment of contrast, so sharply captured in the *Maariv* caricature, was more than emblematic. It pointed to deeper ambiguities in the post-war construction of European institutions, where association depended on not only treaties or geography but also evolving practices of selection and exclusion. UEFA, unlike the more porous European Broadcasting Union, was a tightly structured and prestigious body whose membership signified not just eligibility but also parity within Europe's sporting and political order. As Kiran Klaus Patel and others have shown, Europeanisation cannot be understood solely through legal or economic integration. It also comprised cultural and expressive dimensions – arenas where the limits of Europe were tested rather than fixed.² Building on this

¹ *Maariv*, 25 Apr. 1978, 5.

² See Kiran Klaus Patel, *Project Europe: A History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Martin Conway and Klaus Kiran Patel, *Europeanization in the Twentieth Century: Historical Approaches* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). On the symbolic and narrative construction of Europe's boundaries, see Klaus Eder, 'Europe's Borders: The Narrative Construction of the Boundaries of Europe', *European Journal of Social Theory* 9, no. 2 (2006): 255–71; Gemma Scalise, 'The Narrative Construction

insight, the article argues that UEFA operated as a site where European status was negotiated through organisational discretion and figurative signalling.³ In this light, Israel's exclusion, and its eventual reversal, offers a lens onto how the continent's margins were actively constructed.⁴

Belonging is treated as not a fixed status but rather a layered process encompassing legal affiliation, institutional access, cultural orientation and public recognition. As scholars including Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias have noted, such forms of belonging are shaped through political positioning, emotional ties and discursive framing.⁵ In the Israeli case, football became a key site where these dynamics converged. The pursuit of UEFA membership was both a diplomatic campaign and a performative claim to European affiliation. Highlighting this process reveals how inclusion was negotiated by not only central institutions but also actors at the continent's margins.⁶

Indeed, such decisions were not made in a vacuum. Israeli actors shaped the terms of possible inclusion through persistent lobbying, diplomatic manoeuvring and competing visions of regional direction. Debates in the Israeli press, political sphere and sports administration reflected divergent aspirations: whether to emphasise regional entanglements or articulate a deeper alignment with Europe's institutional order. These were not merely tactical disagreements, but reflected deeper tensions over regional orientation, cultural identification and the quest for institutional recognition. Football thus became a public stage on which Israel's continental future was not only pursued but also contested.

Israel's prolonged struggle for UEFA membership serves here as a lens through which to explore how European institutions negotiated the limits of inclusion. It traces the evolution of Israel's football diplomacy from the 1950s to the early 1990s, situating the campaign within broader post-war dynamics, from Asian exclusion and Cold War realignments to regional crises and shifting notions of continental affiliation. Rather than a simple narrative of rejection, the analysis follows a thematic structure with a largely chronological progression, beginning with early affiliations and exclusions and culminating in Israel's UEFA admission in 1991. While Israel's case was distinctive, its trajectory echoed broader tensions faced by states on Europe's margins, where inclusion rested as much on precedent and discretion as on geography. These dynamics show how actors on both sides influenced the discursive and procedural terms of integration, negotiating cultural and legal inclusion in parallel.

Drawing on FIFA records, diplomatic correspondence and a wide range of Hebrew-language newspapers, the article brings together institutional and discursive perspectives. While FIFA protocols and diplomatic sources shed light on decision-making processes and transnational alignments,⁷ Hebrew press coverage is treated as not merely documentation but also a dynamic arena in which

of European Identity: Meanings of Europe "from Below", *European Societies* 17, no. 4 (2015): 593–614; Gerard Delanty and Chris Rumford, *Rethinking Europe: Social Theory and the Implications of Europeanization* (London: Routledge, 2005).

³The article uses terms like 'European status' and 'Europeanness' as they were employed by historical actors, not to suggest essential cultural traits, but to trace how symbolic belonging was framed, contested and strategically mobilised in both Israeli and European institutional discourse.

⁴On UEFA's early institutional development and its distinct role within post-war European cooperation, see Philippe Vonnard, *Creating a United Europe of Football: The Formation of UEFA (1949–1961)* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Philippe Vonnard, Grégory Quin and Nicolas Bancel, *Building Europe with the Ball: Turning Points in the Europeanization of Football, 1905–1995* (Lausanne: Peter Lang AG, 2016).

⁵Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Belonging and the Politics of Belonging', *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 197–214; Floya Anthias, 'Interconnecting Boundaries of Identity and Belonging and Hierarchy-Making within Transnational Mobility Studies: Framing Inequalities', *Current Sociology* 64, no. 2 (2016): 172–90; Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Racialized Boundaries: Race, Nation, Gender, Colour and Class and the Anti-Racist Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁶See e.g. Kiran Klaus Patel, *The Cultural Politics of Europe: European Capitals of Culture and European Union Since the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 2013); Gerard Delanty, *Inventing Europe: Idea, Identity, Reality* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Bo Stråth, ed., *Europe and the Other and Europe as the Other* (Brussels: P.I.E.–Peter Lang, 2010).

⁷Access to UEFA's internal archives was requested but not granted. Consequently, FIFA materials have proved invaluable for reconstructing key discussions – including expressions of both support and opposition from UEFA officials – which often took place in FIFA forums. These records, complemented by contemporary press coverage and diplomatic correspondence, offer critical insights into UEFA's institutional deliberations.

public meaning and geopolitical orientation were actively constructed.⁸ These media sources illuminate how continental orientation was framed, debated and emotionally charged within the domestic arena. In situating the IFA's trajectory within broader debates on state-building, public diplomacy and transnational governance, the article contributes to scholarship that approaches Europeanisation as an uneven process – shaped by administrative structures as well as cultural positioning and contested identification.⁹

Football appears here as not merely a sport but also a political arena where debates over belonging played out visibly, both within Israeli society and on the international stage. It foregrounds how questions of regional orientation were contested not only in diplomatic forums but also through symbolic gestures in stadiums, press commentary and sports governance. In emphasising this dynamic, the study builds on a growing body of work – including that of Barbara Keys, Alan McDougall, Heather Dichter, Paul Dietschy and Paul Darby – that views sport as a stage for political expression and negotiation, rather than a mere extension of statecraft.¹⁰

Against this backdrop, UEFA's reluctance to admit Israel reflected more than Cold War politics or regional hostility. The IFA's campaign became both a technical effort and a civilisational appeal¹¹ – an attempt to recalibrate Israel's perceived position between Europe and Asia. At the same time, European bodies addressed these dilemmas not by revising their rules, but through improvised adaptation to shifting geopolitical landscapes. These dynamics show how sport functioned as a site where Europe's post-war boundaries were shaped through pragmatic negotiation and evolving institutional practices.

Between Asia and Europe: The IFA's Search for a Continental Home

Organised football in Palestine predates the state of Israel. Under the British Mandate, the Palestine Football Association (PFA) was founded in 1928 and recognised by FIFA the following year. Arab teams initially participated but withdrew in 1931 amid rising tensions. After 1948, the PFA became the IFA, which soon began seeking a regional anchor.¹²

In 1954, UEFA declined Israel's application on geographic grounds. The IFA instead joined the newly formed Asian Football Confederation (AFC, Asia's regional football authority), where it initially found success, hosting and winning the 1964 Asian Cup. But that success was short-lived. Following Israel's military victories in 1967 and 1973, political opposition from Arab and Muslim-majority states intensified. By the mid-1970s, mounting Arab pressure led to Israel's expulsion from the AFC, leaving it in limbo – isolated from Asia and unaccepted in Europe. Protesting the decision,

⁸Press sources span a broad spectrum of Hebrew-language newspapers, including *Maariv*, *Haaretz*, *Davar* and *Yediot Aharonot*. While focused on the Zionist public sphere where most debates over continental belonging took place, the selection captures a range of perspectives within this dominant arena.

⁹See e.g. Kiran Klaus Patel, ed., *The Cultural Politics of Europe* (London: Routledge, 2013); Cris Shore, *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2013); Antje Wiener, *The Invisible Constitution of Politics: Contested Norms and International Encounters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁰See Barbara J. Keys, *Globalizing Sport* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Alan McDougall, *Contested Fields: A Global History of Modern Football* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020); Heather L. Dichter, ed., *Soccer Diplomacy: International Relations and Football since 1914* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2020); Paul Dietschy, 'Making Football Global? FIFA, Europe, and the Non-European Football World, 1912–74', *Journal of Global History* 8, no. 2 (2013): 279; Paul Darby, *Africa, Football, and FIFA: Politics, Colonialism, and Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹¹Here the term civilisational appeal is used as a shorthand for contemporary claims that linked UEFA membership to cultural and historical proximity to Europe, rather than as an endorsement of civilisational hierarchies

¹²Haim Kaufman and Yair Galily, 'Sport, Zionist Ideology and the State of Israel', *Sport in Society* 12, no. 8 (2009): 1013–27; Haim Kaufman and Ilan Tamir, 'The Establishment of the Eretz Israel Football Association and Its International Orientation', *Israel Affairs* 26, no. 4 (2020): 501–14; Haggai Harif, 'Israeli Sport in the Transition from a Mandatory Community to a Sovereign State: Trends of Continuity and Change', *Israel Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2007): 529–53.

IFA Secretary Joseph Dagan warned that the move violated both sportsmanship and legal norms, and that football risked becoming 'a mockery' if such exclusions were allowed to stand.¹³

This was part of a broader trend of regional and sporting isolation. After initial participation in the Olympic Games and the Asian Games, the country faced growing marginalisation from the 1960s onward, driven by political pressure from Arab and non-aligned states. The fallout from the 1972 Munich massacre – in which eleven Israeli athletes were killed – and Israel's exclusion from the 1974 Asian Games underscored how global politics increasingly shaped sporting participation. Meanwhile, new sporting frameworks such as the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF), designed to promote anti-colonial solidarity, explicitly barred Israeli participation. These developments intensified the country's search for a more stable sporting home and contributed to a broader effort to align with European institutions, not only for practical access but also as a marker of international recognition.¹⁴

Lacking a regional base, the IFA appealed to FIFA president João Havelange, who encouraged informal dialogue with UEFA. Some European associations showed support, but opposition remained strong, especially among Eastern Bloc states that had cut ties with Israel after 1967. Officials feared setting a precedent for non-European applicants and upsetting the balance of regional representation, since the association's statutes at the time limited full membership to associations located on the continent. Another possible route, Article 5 of FIFA's constitution, which permitted unaffiliated associations to apply for entry into another confederation, would only surface later.¹⁵ Despite cautious optimism – UEFA indicated in 1975 that Israel's prospects were under serious consideration – the bid stalled.¹⁶ Israeli clubs were allowed to compete in minor events, such as the Intertoto Cup, but full membership remained out of reach. At its 1978 congress in Istanbul, the application was formally rejected.¹⁷

Even before the 1978 rejection, Israeli officials had begun voicing growing frustration with Israel's marginalisation from international football. IFA president Michael Almog warned that Israel had become 'completely excluded, isolated', and that FIFA's promises had become 'written decisions only ... without any practical value'.¹⁸ These concerns persisted well into the next decade. In the late 1980s, FIFA delegates in Zurich echoed the worry, acknowledging that leaving Israel without a confederation risked undermining the credibility of global football governance.¹⁹

By the mid-1980s, the matter returned to the diplomatic stage. In 1986, Prime Minister Shimon Peres raised the issue directly with the European football body, framing Israel's exclusion as incompatible with European cooperation.²⁰ Over the following years, Israeli clubs gained partial access to

¹³Letter from the Israel Football Association to Dr Helmut Käser, 15 Oct. 1974, Fédération Internationale de Football Association Archives (FIFA Archives), Zürich, file 2019-08-15-11-43-09-dpe1642. See also Letter from Joseph Dagan to Dato Teoh Chye Hin, 23 Mar. 1975, Fédération Internationale de Football Association Archives (FIFA Archives), Zürich, file 2019-08-15-11-41-25-dpe1642.

¹⁴For background, see Amichai Alperovich, *Israel in Der Olympischen Bewegung* (Sankt Augustin: Academia-Verlag, 2013); Mahfoud Amara, 'Sport and Political Leaders in the Arab World', *Histoire@ Politique*, no. 2 (2014): 142–53; Stefan Hübner, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974* (Singapore: Nus Press, 2016).

¹⁵For short overviews of these developments, see Uriel Simri, 'Israel and the Asian Games', in *Sport and Politics, Proceedings of the 26th ICHPER World Congress, Wingate Institute, Israel*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: The Emmanuel Gill Publishing House, 1983), 17–23; Yossi Dagan, '80 Shana Le-Hitachdut Le-Kaduregel Be-Yisrael 1928–2008' [80 Years of the Israeli Federation of Football 1928–2008] (Ramat Gan: Israel Football Association, 2008).

¹⁶Meeting No. 4 – Guatemala City, 21 Nov. 1975, 12. FIFA Archives.

¹⁷*Davar*, 30 Apr. 1978, 13.

¹⁸Letter from Michael Almog and Jacob Erel (IFA) to Helmut Käser, 10 Feb. 1977. FIFA Archives, file 2019-08-15-11-38-52-dpe1642.

¹⁹Minutes of the Organising Committee of the Olympic Football Tournament – Barcelona 1992, Meeting No. 1, Zürich, 26 Oct. 1989. FIFA Archives.

²⁰*Maariv*, 24 Feb. 1986, 22.

continental competitions, culminating in full membership in 1994. ‘Now it is official’, declared *Yediot Aharonot*, one of Israel’s leading daily newspapers, ‘we have been accepted into UEFA’.²¹

Sport as Strategy: Football and Israeli Diplomatic Manoeuvring

Sports competitions have long served as tools of diplomacy and symbolic representation. As historian Barbara Keys has shown, the inter-war period marked a peak in the politicisation of athletics, but the underlying logic – the pursuit of visibility and international standing – remained potent in the post-war world.²² Football, with its global appeal, offered states a stage for international engagement. For Israel, especially after exclusion from the AFC, the game became a visible arena for testing the country’s international standing and strategic orientation.

By the 1970s, the country was diplomatically anchored in the Western bloc. While its strongest ties were with the United States, Israeli leaders also sought deeper connections with European governments and the European Economic Community (EEC). Political integration remained limited, but cultural diplomacy through music, cinema and sport offered alternative channels of engagement. Within this realm, football carried particular resonance. As the country’s most popular team sport, exclusion from regional competition struck a public nerve. Initially, AFC participation had been seen as a way to engage with newly independent Asian nations. Yet as boycotts escalated and regional openings narrowed – often framed in the Global South as reactions to Israel’s strategic branding and the unresolved Palestinian question – the IFA’s 1976 expulsion made UEFA membership a matter of national concern.²³ As sports scholar Philippe Broda has argued, FIFA’s stated neutrality often masked deeper asymmetries of legitimacy and power, particularly when regional exclusion was justified as procedural rather than political.²⁴

Domestically, hesitation persisted. In 1973, Foreign Minister Abba Eban and Education Minister Yigal Allon opposed severing ties with Asia, fearing further marginalisation in the Global South.²⁵ But mounting hostility, compounded by diplomatic reversals following the 1967 war, gradually shifted elite opinion. By the mid-1970s, calls to ‘look West’ had gained momentum, reflecting both a tactical response to exclusion and a broader sense of cultural alignment with Europe.

This alignment, however, only emerged over time. In the 1960s, FIFA President Sir Stanley Rous, an English administrator known for his patrician style and Cold War-era institutional conservatism, encouraged Israeli officials to seek entry into UEFA. This initiative was declined not by the confederation, but by Jerusalem itself, wary of jeopardising diplomatic overtures toward Asia.²⁶ Only after the AFC expelled the IFA did that calculus shift decisively. By then, however, the broader political context had changed. Rous had been succeeded by João Havelange, a Brazilian official who served as FIFA president from 1974 to 1998, and whose leadership pivoted FIFA away from its Eurocentric core. Elected with strong backing from African, Asian and Latin American federations, Havelange embraced a pluralist vision, less inclined to redraw regional boundaries or cater to Western preferences. The Israeli case, caught between its own evolving aspirations and a reshaped global landscape,

²¹ *Yediot Aharonot*, 29 Apr. 1994, 19.

²² Keys, *Globalizing Sport*.

²³ In detail on the IFA’s Asian period, see Daniel Mahla, ‘“To the East”? Israeli Soccer’s Asian Period and Debates about the Jewish State’s Cultural Affiliations with the Continent’, *Jewish Social Studies* 28, no. 3 (2023): 143–70.

²⁴ Philippe Broda, ‘FIFA as Referee of the Match Israel–Palestine from 1920 to 2020: An Institutional Approach’, *Sport in History* 42, no. 1 (2020): 76–95. See also Jon Dart, ‘“Brand Israel”: Hasbara and Israeli Sport’, *Sport in Society* 19, no. 10 (2016): 1402–18.

²⁵ *Maariv*, 6 Sept. 1973, 10.

²⁶ On Rous’s support for Israeli integration into UEFA, see e.g. *FIFA News*, no. 106 (Mar. 1972), 277. For Israel’s continued commitment to the AFC, see Minutes of the FIFA–UEFA Consultative Committee Meeting, Zurich, 27 Sept. 1965, where officials noted that an Israeli delegate had been elected to the AFC Executive Committee – effectively precluding UEFA participation at the time. Meeting No. 4 of the Consultative Committee, Zurich, 27 Sept. 1965, 6. FIFA Archives.

exposed not only the limits of procedural adaptation but also the consequences of missed timing and reduced European influence.²⁷

The Israeli press frequently treated the IFA's stalled campaign as a proxy for the country's broader continental positioning. Commentators emphasised the incongruity of inclusion in cultural bodies, such as the EBU, which organised events such as the Eurovision Song Contest, while being kept at arm's length in sport. The contrast surfaced repeatedly in media commentary, expressed through metaphors of liminality, deferral and quasi-exile. In 1977, sports journalist Israel Rosenblatt quipped in *Maariv* that 'Europe is not ready to pull the Israeli chestnuts for FIFA out of the Asian fire'.²⁸ Two years later, he added: 'Too bad they don't play football in Antarctica – we would certainly be accepted there'.²⁹ Such remarks captured the growing frustration with a status that remained unresolved: culturally acknowledged in Europe, yet repeatedly sidelined in sport.

Within the IFA, UEFA membership was often framed in practical terms, as a way to end regional isolation. 'Our main wish is to play football', one official wrote to FIFA, reducing the dilemma to its sporting core.³⁰ Yet these appeals were accompanied by a broader narrative of European affiliation, tied to professionalism and international visibility. Diplomats and journalists increasingly emphasised shared democratic values, economic compatibility and civilisational ties.³¹ While IFA officials maintained a technical tone in formal communications, they also gestured towards normative alignment. In 1976, they reminded FIFA that 'Basketball, Volleyball and other minor sport organisations are already affiliated to European bodies', and stressed that UEFA membership was essential to restoring consistent competition.³²

In this context, comparative examples reinforced the perception that UEFA affiliation rested less on geography than on political discretion. Turkey's admission in 1960, while nominally justified by shifting its football headquarters from Ankara to Istanbul, reflected broader Cold War dynamics, especially its NATO membership and alignment with the West.³³ Israel, by contrast, lacked comparable security anchors and had to rely on sustained lobbying and appeals to shared norms.

UEFA's reluctance to admit the IFA was shaped not only by territorial boundaries or political strategy, but by anxieties about precedent, balance, and potential disruption. While official statements highlighted concerns about political entanglements, a 1979 brochure made the association's stance clear: although there was 'much sympathy for the difficult situation of the Israeli Football Association', its problems 'cannot be solved by importing them to Europe'.³⁴ The remark framed Israel as not merely outside the region but also a source of potential disruption. Yet not all voices aligned with this view. Officials in West Germany consistently advocated for Israel's inclusion, citing Cold War loyalties and historical responsibility. Their stance illustrated a broader post-Holocaust commitment to renewing Jewish–European ties, manifest in not only trade and

²⁷ On Rous's support for Israeli integration into UEFA, see e.g. *FIFA News*, no. 106 (Mar. 1972), 277, FIFA Archives. For Havelange's political repositioning of FIFA and his backing from Global South federations, see Darby, *Africa, Football, and FIFA*, 85–107.

²⁸ *Maariv*, 14 Mar. 1977, 12.

²⁹ *Maariv*, 14 Oct. 1979, add. 2.

³⁰ Letter from Michael Almog and Giora Milchen (IFA) to João Havelange. FIFA Archives, file 2019-08-15-11-38-52-dpel642. See also Minutes of the XIth Ordinary Congress, Buenos Aires, 30 May 1978, FIFA Archives, 21, where IFA president Michael Almog described Israel's aim as 'to play international football', and cited precedents from UNESCO and other federations that had already recognised Israel as European.

³¹ E.g. *Maariv*, 19 Nov. 1974, 5; *ibid.*, 25 Nov. 1974, 5; *ibid.*, 25 Mar. 1979, add. 9.

³² Letter from Michael Almog and Shmuel Milchen (IFA) to President João Havelange, 24 Feb. 1976, FIFA Archives.

³³ Dağhan Irak, 'From Battlefields to Football Fields: Turkish Sports Diplomacy in the Post-Second World War Period', in *Sport and Diplomacy: Games within Games*, ed. Stuart Murray and Geoffrey Allen Pigman (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 158–61; Özgehan Senyuva and Sevecen Tunc, 'Turkey and the Europe of Football', *Sport in History* 35, no. 4 (2015): 567–79.

³⁴ Cited after Hans Bangerter, 'Die UEFA einst und jetzt', in *Europäische Fußball-Union*, ed. Hans Bangerter 25 Jahre UEFA (Bern: UEFA, 1979), 36.

diplomacy but also sport.³⁵ UEFA's eventual acceptance resulted not from formal rule changes, but from incremental adaptation to shifting political and institutional pressures.

Claiming Europe: Internal Debates over Continental Belonging

The question of continental inclusion involved more than diplomacy. Within Israel, UEFA membership carried cultural and political weight, tied to broader debates about the country's place in the post-war international order. As much as officials lobbied international bodies, the campaign also unfolded in newspaper columns, cabinet meetings and public debate, turning football into a stage for national aspirations and anxieties. To understand the force of these debates, we must first recall the status football had acquired in Israeli society.

The sport's role in shaping national consciousness extended beyond the stadium. Football had become Israel's most popular sport, often serving as a barometer of national pride and international recognition. E.W. Hobsbawm once remarked that 'the imagined community of millions seems more real as a team of eleven named people'.³⁶ From its early days, Zionism recognised athletics as part of its nation-building ethos, and after 1948, international competitions became a visible expression of statehood.³⁷ Football's rise as the country's most popular sport heightened the stakes of the IFA's expulsion from Asia, transforming what might have remained an administrative dispute into a matter of national concern.

These debates, however, were not socially neutral, but unfolded within a public sphere shaped by enduring hierarchies of voice and visibility. In the state's early decades, Jews of European origin, Ashkenazim, dominated political and cultural life, including organised sport. By the 1980s, Jews from Middle Eastern and North African backgrounds, Mizrahim, had gained greater political visibility, yet debates over continental direction remained largely the domain of Ashkenazi elites. After years of marginalisation, Arab players and teams had become more prominent on the field, but they played little role in public conversations about the country's international alignment. As sociologist Tamir Sorek has shown, football served as a site of both integration and protest for Palestinian citizens of Israel.³⁸ Yet in the Hebrew-language press, where questions of affiliation and orientation were actively framed, their perspectives remained peripheral. Ultra-Orthodox communities, for whom football carried limited cultural resonance, were similarly absent.

This silence was not merely circumstantial. It reflected a political culture that cast Europe as both an aspirational ideal and a strategic reference point, while sidelining voices that challenged this framing. Mizrahi perspectives would become more visible in later decades, but during the UEFA debates of the 1970s and 1980s, the dominant imagination of continental belonging rarely included them.³⁹

Many Ashkenazi commentators framed UEFA membership as a natural alignment, emphasising shared political values and technological advancement. Abba Eban echoed this view in 1967, describing Israel's 'deep attachment to Europe', rooted in the democratic traditions of its founders.⁴⁰ But

³⁵See FIFA Congress Proceedings, Montreal, 16 July 1976, where the DFB formally proposed that Israel be authorised to participate in UEFA competitions, citing both its isolation and the need for institutional resolution. 40th FIFA Congress Proceedings, Montreal, 16 July 1976, FIFA Archives, Enclosure XII/5. On West German support for the IFA's UEFA bid more broadly, see: Manfred Lämmer, *Deutsch-Israelische Fußballfreundschaft* (Bielefeld: Die Werkstatt, 2019), 192–208.

³⁶Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 143. The quote has become a staple in studies of nationalism and sport. In the Israeli case, it gains particular resonance: international football became not only a vehicle for national pride but also a contested terrain in the country's search for regional affiliation and symbolic inclusion.

³⁷See the works cited in note 4.

³⁸Tamir Sorek, *Arab Soccer in a Jewish State: The Integrative Enclave* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³⁹On the structural marginalisation of Mizrahim in Israeli society, see e.g. Sami Shalom Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel: White Jews, Black Jews* (London: Routledge, 2009); Yehouda A. Shenav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006); Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements* (London: Pluto, 2017).

⁴⁰*Davar*, 24 Apr. 1967, 3.

Zionism had long encompassed competing visions. While many political and economic elites saw the state as an extension of European modernity, others – including figures on the Zionist left and some Mizrahi intellectuals – pointed to Jewish integration in the Middle East and imagined a society shaped by its regional setting, challenging received distinctions between East and West.⁴¹

These divergences gained urgency in the 1960s as tensions within the AFC intensified. Israeli media began referring to ‘Europeanists’ and ‘Asianists’ to describe differing perspectives on the country’s sporting future. Such labels captured real tendencies but rarely reflected coherent camps; most actors expressed ambivalence or shifted positions over time. While many journalists and administrators favoured European integration early on, Israel’s initial participation in the AFC reflected political pragmatism. As Arab and Muslim-majority nations increasingly boycotted Israeli teams, the ‘Europeanist’ argument gained ground: Israel’s natural home, they insisted, lay with UEFA rather than a hostile Asia.

These positions tapped into broader ideological fault lines. European models had long shaped Zionist imagination, yet Israel’s geographic and political realities rendered such affiliations precarious. Commentators often presented entry into UEFA not as a logistical fix but as a reaffirmation of cultural belonging, echoing the dilemmas of other peripheral states seeking Western recognition.⁴² Europe was portrayed as modern and orderly; Asia as politically unstable and exclusionary. Football became another arena in which these contrasting perceptions played out.

This layering of meaning was not confined to sport. Israeli leaders had long used similar arguments in their dealings with European institutions, especially during early efforts to associate with the EEC.⁴³ Already in 1957, diplomats framed Israel’s connection to Europe in terms of shared cultural heritage, moral debt and historical continuity. Ambassador Gideon Rafael, for example, was instructed in 1957 to remind his counterparts that ‘they have inherited their spiritual values from that little but enduring people which you are going to represent among them.’⁴⁴ Such arguments were part of a wider discursive strategy. Europe was depicted as not only a key partner but also a cultural peer, capable of affirming Israel’s civilisational standing.

By the 1970s, these divisions gained sharper expression in Israeli football discourse as the IFA faced expulsion from the AFC. Journalist and broadcaster Yosef ‘Tommy’ Lapid, later a prominent public figure and cabinet minister, emerged as one of the most vocal proponents of turning westward, calling for a decisive pivot to UEFA. In a 1974 editorial titled ‘We Are in Europe’, he dismissed any lingering identification with Asia and claimed that Israel was ‘one of the three nations that shaped the continent’s character’. Drawing on a Eurocentric reading of Western civilisation, Lapid cast the Jewish contribution, alongside Greek philosophy and Roman law, as foundational to Europe’s legal and cultural heritage. UEFA membership, he argued, was not merely a sporting goal but a declaration of civilisational belonging.⁴⁵

Poet and journalist Moshe Dor rejected this Eurocentric framing. Drawing on early Zionist thought, he envisioned the state as part of a broader postcolonial awakening in Asia. For Dor and others, this was not just a political stance but a historical one: the Jewish people’s formative myths, ancient homeland and cultural memory were rooted in the East, a legacy they argued should be embraced

⁴¹ For examples, see *Zmanim*, 24 June 1955, 3; *Sulam*, 17 July 1955, 5–9. On the Zionist debates, see e.g. Hanan Harif, *Anashim Achim Anachnu. Ha-Pniya Misraha Be-Hagut Ha-Tsyionit (For We Be Brethren: The Turn to the East in Zionist Thought)* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2019).

⁴² Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), esp. 1–10, 57–61.

⁴³ In detail on these negotiations, see Gadi Heimann and Lior Herman, *Israel’s Path to Europe: The Negotiations for a Preferential Agreement, 1957–1970* (London: Routledge, 2018).

⁴⁴ Ben-Gurion’s brief to Ambassador Gideon Rafael, 1957, cited after Sharon Pardo and Joel Peters, eds., *Israel and the European Union: A Documentary History* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 1.

⁴⁵ *Maariv*, 19 Nov. 1974, 5.

rather than denied. Turning away from the region, he warned, risked reinforcing Israel's image as a Western outpost, alienated from its surroundings.⁴⁶

The instability of continental categories like Europe and Asia was not unique to the Israeli case. Scholars such as Gerard Delanty and Tobias Metzler have shown that these terms function less as geographic givens than as symbolic constructs, shaped through shifting alignments of culture, memory and political imagination.⁴⁷ Metzler, writing on Meiji-era Japan, illustrates how reformers like Fukuzawa Yukichi invoked a universalist vision of Europe while rejecting the imposed category of Asia – reframing affiliation in a way that signalled aspiration, not subordination.⁴⁸ Israeli commentators operated in a different context but used similar discursive strategies. UEFA membership, though framed in pragmatic terms, became a performative act: a way of positioning Israel within a selective and evolving definition of Europe.

Ideological debates over Israel's alignment were reinforced by racialised perceptions of sporting hierarchy. The country's media routinely portrayed Asian teams as disorganised and tactically inferior, while lauding European counterparts for their professionalism and discipline. This Orientalist framing bolstered the 'Europeanist' argument, presenting UEFA as the obvious home. Meanwhile, within the AFC, Israeli clubs were viewed not as regional peers but as outsiders – remnants of colonial influence. The result was an ambiguous position for the IFA: too European for Asia, yet not quite European enough for UEFA.⁴⁹

The impasse mirrored broader post-war dynamics, as Europe struggled to define the contours of its institutional reach. Partial recognition, via trade, cultural agreements or symbolic inclusion, frequently stopped short of full integration. By 1978, this tension reappeared in *Maariv's* editorial, reinforcing the contrast that opened this article. Europe was willing to embrace Israel musically and economically, but remained ambivalent when it came to deeper political or institutional commitments:

[Europe] ... apparently does not know how to deal with us... . We are allowed to be associate members of the common European market... . We are permitted to present the best song at the competition of European television and to win the competition And we will even be allowed to host the next music festival of the European Broadcasting Authority But in all other matters, we remain the 'wandering Jew', who, despite successfully putting down roots in his homeland, must still fight for the right to belong to a continent.⁵⁰

The editorial conveyed a deeper uncertainty at the heart of Europe's post-war architecture: whether belonging was defined by geography, culture or discretionary alliances.⁵¹ UEFA's hesitation exposed this selective logic of integration. It raised a fundamental question: what determined who could truly be part of Europe?⁵²

For some in Israel, UEFA's refusal reinforced a sense of marginality, indispensable to the continent, yet never fully accepted by it. Lapid portrayed football integration as a continuation of

⁴⁶ *Maariv*, 22 Nov. 1974, 22.

⁴⁷ Gerard Delanty, *Europe and Asia beyond East and West* (London: Routledge, 2006); Tobias Metzler, 'Entangled Refractions: Global Perspectives on Europeanism and Asianism', in *Proceedings of the 1st International Conference Europe in Discourse: Identity, Diversity, Borders Athens, Sept. 23–25, 2016*, ed. Juliane House and Themis Kaniklidou (Nashua, NH: Hellenic American University, 2017), 193–204.

⁴⁸ Metzler, 'Entangled Refractions'.

⁴⁹ In detail, see Mahla, "'To the East?'" Israeli Soccer's Asian Period and Debates about the Jewish State's Cultural Affiliations with the Continent'.

⁵⁰ *Maariv*, 23 Apr. 1978, 5.

⁵¹ See Delanty, *Inventing Europe*, especially chapters one and nine on the cultural construction of Europe and its selective postcolonial inclusion practices.

⁵² See Patel, *Project Europe*, especially chapter one; cf. Delanty, *Europe and Asia beyond East and West*, for cultural and civilisational perspectives.

Jewish–European history. Dor saw this embrace as a risk, exposing a deeper fault line in Zionism: whether to anchor the state in a transplanted European heritage or cultivate a regional trajectory.

As early as 1962, journalist Shmuel Shnitzer framed Israel's European dilemma in historical terms. He argued that Jewish efforts to belong on the continent had always been conditional: 'For 1800 years we tried to be Europeans, and Europe – one country after another – spewed us out, incarcerated us in ghettos ... and in the end built gas chambers and crematoriums for us.' His conclusion was stark: Israel should stop seeking external approval and define its place on its own terms.⁵³

Despite these ideological divides, the drive for UEFA membership gained momentum in the 1970s, viewed increasingly as a geopolitical imperative rather than a purely athletic goal. By the middle of the decade, exclusion from European football was a recurring theme in the Israeli press, amplifying anxieties about Israel's uncertain global standing. As *Maariv* would note in 1978, the country remained paradoxically embraced in European cultural and economic frameworks, yet left in limbo on the playing field.

Flexible Borders: UEFA, Institutions and the Politics of Inclusion

Israeli football was shaped by not only national and diplomatic forces but also broader transformations in the sport's structural and commercial landscape. In the decades after the Second World War, global enthusiasm for the game surged, leading to the formalisation of continental competitions. From the 1970s onward, rapid commercialisation and the rise of professionalised leagues altered the sporting landscape. These changes directly affected the IFA, reinforcing its need to affiliate with a stable regional framework.⁵⁴

In the 1950s and 1960s, as continental football structures consolidated around Europe and South America, Israel sought membership in a regional confederation.⁵⁵ After UEFA rejected its bids, the IFA became a founding member of the AFC and played a leading role in its development for two decades. Yet officials remained ambivalent about their regional fit. Despite sustained involvement in Asian competitions, many continued to view UEFA as the more desirable arena, a preference shaped by ongoing debates about the country's strategic orientation.

From a sporting perspective, the benefits of joining UEFA were evident. European football offered the strongest leagues, clubs and national teams, along with superior infrastructure and prestige.⁵⁶ For many Israeli commentators, it symbolised not only technical excellence but also a civilisational standard, sharply contrasted with Asia.⁵⁷ This logic shaped media narratives throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In 1962, *La-Merhav*, a Labour-aligned Israeli daily, described European football as a 'reliable mentor, a dedicated trainer and an ideal model for well-organised sport with a rich tradition'.⁵⁸ A decade later, the IFA made a similar case in its application to UEFA, emphasising that only participation in European competitions could truly develop the Israeli game and expressing a willingness

⁵³ *Maariv*, 24 Aug. 1962, 3.

⁵⁴ On these processes, see Richard Giulianotti and Roland Robertson, *Globalization and Football* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), for the global and European context; and Amir Ben-Porat, 'From Community to Commodity: The Commodification of Football in Israel', *Soccer & Society* 13, no. 3 (2012): 443–57, for the Israeli case. For an in-depth study of Israeli sports diplomacy and international representation, see Udi Carmi and Orr Levental, 'Ambassadors in Tracksuits: Israel's Use of Sports as a Tool of Public Diplomacy', *Sport History Review* 50 (2019): 17–37.

⁵⁵ In detail, see Philippe Vonnard and Grégory Quin, 'Did South America Foster European Football?: Transnational Influences on the Continentalization of FIFA and the Creation of UEFA, 1926–1959', *Sport in Society* 20, no. 10 (2017): 1424–39.

⁵⁶ On UEFA's growing significance during this period, see Jürgen Mittag and Benjamin Legrand, 'Towards a Europeanization of Football? Historical Phases in the Evolution of the UEFA European Football Championship', *Soccer & Society* 11, no. 6 (2010): 709–22.

⁵⁷ See also *FIFA News*, no. 137 (Oct. 1974), FIFA Archives, where even Dato Teoh Chye Hin, Secretary General of the Asian Football Confederation, acknowledged that 'Asian football still requires more improvement to get anywhere near the giants in Europe or South America'.

⁵⁸ *La-Merhav*, 13 Aug. 1963, 3.

to 'undertake all commitments involved in playing within the frame of Europe'.⁵⁹ Even after the IFA's successes in Asian competitions, victories against European teams were celebrated as more significant. In 1979, Rosenblatt still considered the 1960 Olympic qualifier win over Yugoslavia 'the most important event in the history of Israeli football'.⁶⁰

Geographical and logistical factors reinforced this preference. Most European destinations were closer to Israel than those in Asia, reducing travel costs and simplifying scheduling. But UEFA's reluctance was not purely political. Unlike cultural networks such as Eurovision, international football required clearer regional demarcations, particularly for national team tournaments, where competitive balance was at stake. Faced with these constraints, UEFA opted for procedural caution: in 1976, it declined to admit the IFA under existing statutes but left open the possibility of future revision;⁶¹ and again in 1980, when officials at a consultative meeting with FIFA deferred the issue for further consideration.⁶²

Admitting a geographically contested member risked setting a precedent for other exceptional cases and undermining regional demarcations. As observers warned during the 1970s, allowing associations to cross confederal lines could 'destroy the principle of geographical grouping' and unsettle existing structures.⁶³ While neither UEFA nor FIFA ever codified a consistent policy on such exceptions, the sensitivity surrounding Israel's application remained high.⁶⁴ Even when FIFA formally rejected the AFC's anti-Israel amendment in 1976, no concrete steps were taken to clarify the IFA's status – exposing the limits of enforcement in global football governance.⁶⁵

UEFA's provisional approach continued into the early 1980s. In 1982, the association allowed Israel to participate in its Olympic qualifiers, a move consistent with earlier ad hoc arrangements but still treated as exceptional. Officials explicitly warned that such accommodations should not become standard practice and referred the matter to FIFA's Emergency Committee.⁶⁶ The gesture allowed participation while withholding full commitment, preserving an appearance of neutrality while deferring a more decisive resolution.

These provisional arrangements had broader implications. In global football, regional bodies govern access to major tournaments, and a team's confederal placement shapes not only its path to competition but also its symbolic location within the sport's international order. By intermittently routing Israeli teams through European qualifiers without granting full membership, UEFA acknowledged the underlying tension without resolving it, substituting short-term adaptability for structural clarity.

From the Israeli perspective, the issue was not only procedural but also about competitive opportunity. Some saw UEFA as a more demanding yet prestigious arena, while others argued that the AFC

⁵⁹ Letter from Michael Almog (IFA) to UEFA President Artemio Franchi, 12 Dec. 1975, FIFA Archives, file 2019-08-15-11-40-57-dpe1642.

⁶⁰ *Maariv*, 25 Mar. 1979, add. 9. As Haggai Harif has shown, international matches in the 1950s and 1960s often carried heightened national significance, serving as symbolic arenas for projecting diplomatic aspiration and internal cohesion well before institutional affiliation was secured. See his "'It Is Important that We Beat the Gentiles': The National Significance of Israel's Soccer Matches against the USSR, Summer 1956", *Sport in History* 12, no. 8 (2009): 320–45.

⁶¹ Minutes of the Executive Committee, Meeting No. 5, Rio de Janeiro, 6 Apr. 1976, FIFA Archives, 9.

⁶² Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, Zürich, 5 July 1980, FIFA Archives.

⁶³ *FIFA News*, no. 110 (July 1972): 276, FIFA Archives; Letter from Michael Almog and Giora Milchen (Israel Football Association) to João Havelange, 10 Oct. 1976, FIFA Archives, file 2019-08-15-11-38-52-dpe1642.

⁶⁴ See FIFA Executive Committee Minutes, Rio de Janeiro, 6 Apr. 1976, where Dr Franchi noted that UEFA statutes excluded Israel on geographic grounds but acknowledged the issue would be discussed and potentially resolved through statute revision. Minutes of Meeting No. 5 of the Executive Committee, Rio de Janeiro, 6 Apr. 1976, FIFA Archives, 9.

⁶⁵ Minutes of the Executive Committee Meeting, Prague, Oct. 1976, FIFA Archives. For an earlier confrontation, see Executive Committee Minutes, Rome, 6 Nov. 1974, where AFC officials acknowledged widespread refusals to play Israel and insisted on enforcing their resolution despite FIFA statutes. Minutes of Meeting No. 2 of the Executive Committee, Rome, 6 Nov. 1974, FIFA Archives, 7.

⁶⁶ Minutes of Meeting No. 2 of the FIFA Organising Committee for the 1984 Olympic Football Tournament, Zürich, 23 Oct. 1982, FIFA Archives, 3.

had offered a viable route to international success.⁶⁷ Israeli teams had fared well in Asia, qualifying for the Olympics in 1968 and the World Cup in 1970, milestones that seemed less attainable within the tougher European field. But as the AFC consolidated regional alliances, Israeli clubs and national teams encountered growing isolation, with opponents increasingly refusing to play.

Israeli frustration with liminal status had grown throughout the 1970s. In a 1977 letter to FIFA, IFA Chairman Michael Almog described UEFA as 'the only solution', warning that exclusion from all confederations was untenable.⁶⁸ Although UEFA eventually admitted Israel, the process revealed persistent ambiguity in its procedures – driven by not only internal hesitation but also shifting external pressures and the slow erosion of Cold War alignments. This procedural uncertainty reflected a broader feature of post-war football governance.⁶⁹ As Philippe Vonnard has shown, the organisation lacked a consistent mechanism for addressing anomalies, relying instead on ad hoc interpretations of its own statutes.⁷⁰

This procedural indecision was not unique to UEFA. In 1977, President João Havelange invoked Article 5 of FIFA's statutes – a rarely used clause allowing unaffiliated associations to join another confederation – when he proposed creating a Pacific Confederation for Israel and Taiwan. Israeli officials rejected the idea as geographically absurd, preferring UEFA inclusion as the only viable solution.⁷¹ Nearly a decade later, Havelange conceded that a 'solution is planned to solve the situation of the Israeli Association in order to bring tranquility to the Asian Continent', a diplomatic deferral that tacitly admitted the untenability of Israel's exclusion.⁷² The episode revealed both FIFA's improvisational governance and UEFA's inertia.⁷³

UEFA's application of membership rules was inconsistent. While Israel faced repeated deferrals, other politically sensitive applicants, such as East Germany, were admitted with little debate when Cold War logic demanded it. As Alan McDougall has shown, East Germany's inclusion, despite its contested legitimacy, exemplified how strategic convenience often outweighed principle.⁷⁴

As the AFC strengthened regional alliances, Israeli teams found themselves increasingly sidelined – described by one journalist at the time, in language that reflected and reproduced racialised stereotypes, as 'the gypsies of world football'.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, UEFA remained reluctant to unsettle its internal balance by admitting a non-European member. But boundary-making was not unilateral. Just as UEFA's decisions shaped the IFA's trajectory, shifting political dynamics within Asia actively influenced deliberations in Europe. The entanglement of regional structures, one excluding, the other hesitating, underscored how continental boundaries were not fixed lines but outcomes of continuous negotiation.

Asian football underwent marked transformation during Israel's tenure in the AFC. The 1974 Asian Games in Tehran, which welcomed new Arab members and China, marked a growing sense of

⁶⁷ E.g., *Maariv*, 23 Oct. 1966, 14; *ibid.*, 22 Nov. 1970, 17; *Davar*, 26 Oct. 1975, 13.

⁶⁸ Letter from Michael Almog and Jacob Erel (IFA) to Helmut Käser, 10 Feb. 1977, FIFA Archives, file 2019-08-15-11-38-52-dpe1642.

⁶⁹ Philippe Broda, 'Europe Versus Emerging Countries Within FIFA: Using Inflation as a Conflict Regulation Mechanism', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 34, no. 15 (2017): 1620; Darby, *Africa, Football, and FIFA*; Tamir Bar-On and Luis Escobedo, 'FIFA Seen from a Postcolonial Perspective', *Soccer & Society* 20, no. 1 (2019): 39–60.

⁷⁰ Vonnard, *Creating a United Europe of Football*, especially chapters four, six and eight.

⁷¹ Minutes of Emergency Committee Meeting No. 15, Rottach-Egern, 18 Oct. 1977, FIFA Archives.

⁷² Minutes of Meeting No. 1 of the Organising Committee for the FIFA Under-16 World Tournament Canada 1987, Mexico City, 28 May 1986, FIFA Archives, 3.

⁷³ Anthony King, 'Regulatory Regimes in European Sport', in *Sport and the Transformation of Modern Europe: States, Media and Markets 1950–2010*, eds Alan Tomlinson, Christopher Young and Richard Holt (London: Routledge, 2011), 179–82.

⁷⁴ Alan McDougall, 'East Germany and the Europeanisation of Football', in *Origins and Birth of the Europe of Football*, ed. Paul Dietsch (London: Routledge, 2017), 68–84.

⁷⁵ *Maariv*, 27 Nov. 1986, 26.

regional cohesion.⁷⁶ But this very consolidation ultimately hastened Israel's expulsion. UEFA, however, offered no immediate alternative. Its 1954 rejection had stated plainly that Israel belonged 'de facto and de jure to the Asian continent'. Unlike the European Basketball Federation, which actively sought to integrate Mediterranean neighbours in order to raise its competitive level vis-à-vis the NBA,⁷⁷ football's governing bodies remained cautious – citing fears of precedent-setting and scheduling disruption. As one of FIFA's dominant confederations, UEFA prioritised preserving its internal hierarchy and proved reluctant to broaden its geographic remit.⁷⁸

Concerns about balance on the global stage also played a role. During the 1970s, as African and Asian federations pushed for a fairer distribution of World Cup berths, admitting another competitor raised anxieties. West Germany, a consistent backer of Israel's case, could afford generosity thanks to its footballing dominance. Others, notably the Soviet Union and Scandinavian countries, were more hesitant, wary of upsetting the established order.⁷⁹ Exclusion, then, reflected not just politics and geography but also competition over access and UEFA's desire to protect its internal balance.

IFA's eventual inclusion came only gradually. The collapse of the Soviet Union removed a key source of ideological resistance, and by the early 1990s, UEFA began to widen its scope. As European football professionalised and labour markets liberalised, Israeli players and clubs became increasingly integrated into continental circuits.⁸⁰ This shift formed part of a broader reconfiguration of regional alignments in the post-Cold War era, to which Israel's case added a distinctive, politically charged dimension.

By the mid-1990s, football's commercialisation, shifting ideas of regional identity and the fading Cold War divisions created a more receptive climate. Israel's move from Asia to Europe reflected not only diplomatic persistence but a wider reconfiguration of regional alignments. UEFA avoided formal redesign by invoking a rarely used clause permitting non-European members lacking regional alternatives – a pragmatic solution that resolved the impasse without redefining boundaries. The outcome reflected UEFA's preference for incremental adaptation over structural reform. The consequences of this gradual integration were felt well beyond the football field.

The Boundaries of European Belonging

When Israeli players entered UEFA competitions in the early 1990s, the move was greeted with both excitement and unease. 'We are still Asians, and the Europeans know that too', noted Yediot Aharonot in 1992 – a reminder that participation did not erase distance.⁸¹

Israel's prolonged exclusion from UEFA reflected not just regional politics but also broader uncertainties about the continent's boundaries. Though often attributed to Arab pressure, the decision revealed a recurring pattern of selective inclusion. Comparing Israel's path to other peripheral cases helps clarify how institutional borders were shaped by shifting political and symbolic considerations.

Earlier cases, such as Turkey's Cold War-era admission, show how strategic considerations could override geographic formalism. A second wave of institutional flexibility followed the Soviet Union's

⁷⁶On this, see Stefan Hübner, *Pan-Asian Sports and the Emergence of Modern Asia, 1913–1974* (Singapore: Nus Press, 2016), 230–59.

⁷⁷Yair Galily and Ken Sheard, 'Cultural Imperialism and Sport: The Americanization of Israeli Basketball', *Culture, Sport, Society* 5, no. 2 (2002): 55–78.

⁷⁸Vonnard, *Creating a United Europe of Football*. The quote on UEFA viewing Israel as belonging 'de facto and de jure to the Asian continent' appears on p. 111.

⁷⁹For UEFA's internal concerns over slot redistribution and geopolitical balance, see Darby, *Africa, Football, and FIFA*, 85–113.

⁸⁰On these processes, see Mittag and Legrand, 'Towards a Europeanization of Football?'; Anthony King, *The European Ritual: Football in the New Europe* (London: Routledge, 2003).

⁸¹*Yediot Aharonot*, 20 Aug. 1992, add. 4.

collapse: while most successor states west of the conventional Eurasian boundary remained in UEFA, the Central Asian republics joined the Asian Football Confederation. When Kazakhstan returned to UEFA in 2002, its move exemplified how political reorientation, rather than geography, shaped membership decisions.⁸² Israel's bid, lacking both clear geography and strategic anchor, tested the limits of these evolving norms.

The campaign also exposed how domestic debates shaped foreign policy ambitions. Israeli media often framed UEFA membership as an expression of cultural proximity rather than a technical matter. Football served as a platform for projecting national orientation, channelling public sentiment into visible expressions of Europe-facing aspiration.

These contradictions reflected a broader uncertainty over Israel's continental position. As early as 1967, *Davar*, a leading Labour-aligned Israeli daily, described the country's dual orientation as a case of geographical schizophrenia: 'With one foot, we play football to win the "Asian Cup," and with the other foot, we are trying to get into the "[European] Common Market"'.⁸³ UEFA's rejection, though framed in geographic terms, ultimately hinged on politics. The IFA's campaign thus sought not only participation but also symbolic anchoring within an evolving European order.⁸⁴

Despite eventual admission, the contradictions endured. In 1999, Maccabi Haifa supporters were attacked during a UEFA Cup match in Moscow, as Russian fans chanted 'Jews out', invoked Holocaust imagery and assaulted the team bus.⁸⁵ Earlier, after a 1992 defeat to Austria, one opponent had remarked, 'You wanted Europe, you got Europe' – a half-ironic comment capturing the tension between membership and legitimacy.⁸⁶ The pattern has persisted into the twenty-first century: UEFA matches scheduled to take place in Israel were suspended during the 2006 Lebanon War, while recurrent boycott calls during subsequent Gaza wars again exposed the fragility of Israel's place within European competition.⁸⁷

Seen from this perspective, Israel's campaign for UEFA membership exposes the contingent character of Europe's post-war institutions. Admission came not through principle but through accommodation, as the continent's borders were drawn as much by circumstance as by conviction. What appears an anomaly in football governance reflects a broader pattern in post-war Europe, where inclusion rested on negotiation rather than geography or rule. Europeanisation, from this vantage, was less a coherent project than a series of adjustments shaped by diplomacy, prestige and perception. Israel's admission did not resolve Europe's ambiguities; it revealed them.

Acknowledgements. This research was supported by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). I thank the anonymous reviewers of *Contemporary European History* for their helpful and constructive comments.

⁸² Adilzhan Nurmakov, 'Kazakhstan and the Global Industry of Mega Events: A Case of Autocratic Management', in *Mega Events in Post-Soviet Eurasia: Shifting Borderlines of Inclusion and Exclusion*, ed. Andrey Makarychev and Alexandra Yatsyk (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 99–130.

⁸³ *Davar*, 24 Apr. 1967, 3.

⁸⁴ For additional insight into UEFA and FIFA's informal decision-making, personal networks and inter-nation sporting traditions, see the special issues on *Sport in History* 37, no. 3, and *Sport History Review* 51, no. 1. These collections explore how interpersonal relationships and institutional culture influence sporting diplomacy.

⁸⁵ *Maariv*, 5 Mar. 1999, 11.

⁸⁶ Cited in *Yediot Aharonot*, 29 Oct. 1992, 3.

⁸⁷ On recurring boycott campaigns, see Broda, 'FIFA as Referee'; Dart, 'Brand Israel'.

Cite this article: Daniel Mahla, "Out of Bounds: Israel, European Football, and the Making of Continental Belonging," *Contemporary European History* (2026): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777326101477>.