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Guy Mor

Andrea Molle

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# Should the State of Israel Pursue Krav Maga as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Jewish People? History and Politics Say Yes.

## Comments

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International Society of Martial Arts

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# Should the State of Israel pursue Krav Maga as an intangible cultural heritage of the Jewish people? History and politics say yes.

Guy Mor<sup>a</sup>, Andrea Molle<sup>b</sup>

a. Ph.D., Israeli College of Sport

b. Ph.D., Chapman University

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## Abstract

Krav Maga ('contact combat') is an Israeli combat discipline arguably one of the many intangible cultural heritages of Israel and the Jewish people. It has played a unique role in the (re)creation and preservation of the Jewish identity and the formation of the state of Israel.

Recently we observe a growing academic literature debating the role of martial arts in international affairs and domestic political processes. It is the scope of this paper to contribute to this proposing a framework for understanding Krav-Maga as a means of cultural diplomacy as seen in other nations.

**Key words:** Krav-Maga, cultural diplomacy, martial arts, self-defense.

## Introduction

Social-scientific research on the martial arts has grown exponentially in recent years (Bowman, 2015). This exciting field of inquiry has successfully engaged many scholars within cultural studies, history and sociology. An increasing number of scholarly works (Green & Svinth, 2003), in several promising areas of investigation, especially with respect to Japanese, Chinese, and European tradition, is now being published by established universities and commercial presses (Channon & Jennings, 2014). Peer reviewed articles on various aspects of martial arts are also being disseminated regularly in a broad range of internationally recognized academic journals (Farrer & Whalen-Bridge, 2011).

Such growing literature presents some interesting evidence of the relationship between martial arts and cultural diplomacy. Scholars in the field have shown, for example, how the

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<sup>a</sup> [guy@ics.org.il](mailto:guy@ics.org.il)

<sup>b</sup> Research Associate, Institute for the Study of Religion, Economics and Society Adjunct Coach (Aikido), Chapman Athletics

<sup>b</sup> [molle@chapman.edu](mailto:molle@chapman.edu)

martial arts have been, directly or indirectly, involved in international affairs and domestic political processes throughout history. For example, by examining the history of the political support of Japanese Budo as a way to expand the Japanese's sphere of influence (Bennet, 2015) or the Soviet Russia's support for SAMBO (Foxall, 2013) as a way to promote communism, or the contemporary Chinese efforts to promote Wushu as an Olympic discipline (Judkins & Nielsen, 2015), we can really appreciate the constant interplay between martial arts and diplomacy. A broad variety of case studies, focusing on the role of ethno-nationalism, colonialism, identity politics, or nation building present the fundamental argument that martial arts are framed by governments as a founding element of the nation discourse (Griffith, 2016). Most of the time framed as an element of a broader use of cultural heritages as a political tool.

Cultural heritages, tangible and intangible, represent the values and the norms of a nation, they contribute to set parameters for status and position, establish and reinforce collective memories, define acceptable and reprimanded behaviors, and ultimately contribute to the emergence of collective ethnic identities that reflect the knowledge acquired through repeated personal interactions (Jaquet & Sørensen, 2015). The evidence of a shared sentiment of attachment to a form of cultural heritages can be a powerful predictor to the establishment of symbolic boundaries that separate the "people" of a nation from the "others," the foreigner. Cultural heritages are, after all, a form of nativism, meaning that are meant to materially connect the people to a supposedly authentic historical origin that defines them as a collective actor. Nativism can be defined as a "thin ideology," that is anchored to a more substantial set of ideas (Neuner & Wratil, 2020). It holds as its core that nations should be inhabited only by members of the native group (the "people") that share a common origin and destiny while others, either non-native individuals or ideas, area threat to its very existence that need to be dealt with also, if necessary, by means of physical violence. Political actors can use those ideas to foster group exclusiveness and cohesion by constructing the "other" as an identity threat. Furthermore, if political actors are able to exploit actual practices or cultural artifacts to offer ways to culturally isolate the others and respond to the "threat" those can be extremely effective in mobilizing consensus. An extensive body of research demonstrates that the practice of martial arts is one of such artifacts as it has several tangible effects on collective identities, cultures, and nation building, as much as other, more traditional, cultural heritages (Tuckett, 2016). Consistently with the mainstream theoretical understanding of nationalism in Political Science (Anderson & Aslandis, 2016), martial arts can definitely be seen as cultural heritage for they contribute to the recreation of a national ethos and foster exclusivity of in-group membership.

With these premises, our paper will focus on the specific case of Israeli Krav Maga ('contact combat') and its unique role in the (re)creation and preservation of the Jewish identity in both the instances of the formation of the modern State of Israel and the diaspora, and its omit value as a mean to promote cultural diplomacy of Israel.

### **Ancient historical background**

Evidence for the existence of an Israeli people in the land of Israel is found in archeological findings dated as early as 1208 BC (Hasel, 1998). Some of these findings support the notion that Israel was a fighting nation with military abilities (Golden, 2004; Rollstone, 2010).

Jewish cultural heritage enjoys stories of heroic events and figures such as of David who beat Goliath, and Samson who was given immense strength to fight his enemies King James Bible, 2017, Judges 16:17). In later years we can find philosophers as Maimonides (1135-1208 AC) who opined that regular physical training should be an integral part of healthy living and advocated for a healthy lifestyle (Rosner, 2002).

The land of Israel is located strategically between three continents, which made it a favorite location for occupation by various empires in the old days, thus, resulted in an ongoing opposition to subjugation by the Jews of Israel, such as the case of the Maccabees rebellion against the Seleucid Empire (Bard, 2019), and the first Jewish–Roman War mostly known for its tragedy ending in Masada, where most Israeli rebels committed mass suicide preferring to die then falling in the hands of their conqueror (Josephus, 1974). Some of these conquering empires, exiled Jews as a mean of punishment (Heilprin, 1961). These deportations brought many Jews to reside as foreign minorities in other countries (mostly in Europe) losing their national pride, subjected to humiliation and violence (Shapira, 2012).

### **Manifestation of a new ideology (late 19<sup>th</sup> century)**

In the late 18th century in the Habsburg Monarchy some religious freedom was granted to Jews (Shapira, 2012) and Alexander the 2nd (Emperor of Russia) gave Jews the right to participate more freely in educational programs and economic life which were barred from them before (Shapira, 2012). This gave hope among Jews for a better future, however, in spite of these few humanitarian actions Anti-Semitism (hostility to, prejudice, or discrimination against Jews) did not disappear, in fact, it re-surfaced with intensity in the late 19th century (Anonymous, 2005). Violent attacks against Jews continued to erupt, leading to an understanding that anti-Semitism in Europe was unlikely to fade. As a result two major trends in Jewish lives surfaced—one practical and one ideological. The practical aspect was an increase in Jewish emigration from Russia to other countries, including but not limited to Palestine (later to become Israel). The second was the development of a new ideology promulgated by Jewish leadership, encouraging Jews to act proactively and create their own future rather than accepting the status quo as inevitable (Shapira, 2012).

Cultural heritages contribute to the emergence of collective ethnic identities that reflect the knowledge acquired through repeated personal interactions. While some of these identities might be dormant at times, they can be activated as needed by political actors as was the case with Jewish leaders and scholars as Judah Leib Pinsker, who wrote in 1882 an article named “Auto-Emancipation” calling for the Jewish people to seek independence rather than relying on other nations to protect them (Pinsker, 1951). Pinsker opened his article with an ancient Hebrew saying: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?... And if not now, when?” (Yosef, 2000). By using this traditional saying in his article, he associated the new ideology to Jewish heritage, providing a powerful motivation to support the ideological change.

Continues expressions of anti-Semitism, reinforced the support in the ideological change, leading to the creation of the Zionist movement towards the end of the 19th century and, encouraged other Jewish leaders as Max Nordau and Ze’ev Jabotinsky to further contribute to the new ideology (Shapira, 2012).

In 1898, Max Nordau continued Pinsker’s strategy by linking traditional heroes as Samson, Shimon bar Kokhba and Judas Maccabeus, to a term he called “Muscular Judaism” referring to

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the concept of Jews with intense national pride, physical prowess, and the ability to fight and protect themselves and their nation (Kaufman, 1996).

Similarly, Ze'ev Jabotinsky founded the Jewish Self-Defense Organization in Odessa (Jabotinsky, 2010), and argued that athletic training should be practiced on a regular basis to ensure that the Jewish population was able to fight for its freedom and national homeland (Galili & Koufman, 2009). This political ideology change encouraged many Jews to immigrate to what was then known as Palestine—a territory governed by the Ottoman Empire (Shapira, 2012).

### **Realization of the new ideology in Palestine**

From 1904-1914, about 35,000 Jews immigrated to Palestine (Anonymous, 1984) giving effect to the new ideology of the proud, strong Jew by creating a new form of agricultural settlement known as Kibbutz, and assuming responsibility of guarding Jewish settlements. Bar-Giyora organization (formed in 1907), was a Jewish grouping which took upon himself to guard Jewish settlements. The name of the organization is derived from Jewish tradition; as Shimon Bar-Giyora was one of the leaders of the Jewish rebellion against the Roman occupation of Jewish land in 66 - 73 AC (Shapira, 2012), hence we can see again the connection between old heritage and the new ideology.

In 1908 Hashomer organization (“The Guard”) replaced Bar-Giyora as the movement that embodied the ethos of proud Jewish warriors taking upon themselves to protect Jewish settlements in Palestine (Shapira, 2012).

On November 2nd 1917, after the British conquered Palestine from the Ottoman Empire, the UK Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour stated that the British government favors the establishment of a national homeland for the Jews in Palestine (Shapira, 2012). This statement led to an increase in Jewish immigration to Palestine (Yakova & Lavi, 2004) but also to an escalation in hostile resistance by the local Arab population who opposed this idea. In response, Jewish organizations initiated forms of combat training relying mainly on known martial disciplines, such as Ju-Jitsu and boxing, combined with some practical experience and knowledge acquired by Jewish immigrants during training in their countries of origin (Bar-Maoz, 2012). Unfortunately, these techniques failed to save lives in real combat situations (Cohen-Gil, 2013).

In 1920, following another wave of Arab attacks against Jewish residents, the Jewish paramilitary organization “The Hagana” (which succeeded Hashomer organization) was looking for an unarmed combat method which will be effective against Arab attacks (Anonymous, 2020).

Dr. Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), who was disappointed from the low effectiveness of Ju-Jitsu techniques in real combat situations, was looking to create a more effective combat method for his fellow Jews. Feldenkrais conducted a research discovering a principle which he called “unconscious reaction” (also known as “reflexive reaction”). His approach is predicated on the assumptions that human beings have a pre-programmed system of reactions to menaces which are executed unconsciously (Feldenkrais, 2013). This insight led Feldenkrais to establish an improved fighting method whose fundamental principles were later adopted by both Kapap (an abbreviation of Krav Panim el Panim meaning “face-to-face combat”) and Krav-Maga. The Hagana adopted Feldenkrais' method, appointing him to train its members (Cohen-Gil, 2013).

Between 1936 and 1939 the Arabs in Palestine initiated a revolt hoping to end Jewish increased immigration and advance their independence; this revolt resulted in numerous casualties on all sides (Nevo, 1979). These violent actions compelled Jewish residents to further develop hand-to-hand combat techniques, alongside physical and basic military education (Mor, 2019), leading to the creation of Sport Magen (defensive sport), which incorporated techniques from Ju-Jitsu, boxing, wrestling, as well as some of Feldenkrais's ideas. Sport Magen was promoted first by Gershon Kofler and later by Yehuda Markus (Kofler, 1941; Gross & Nativ, 2016). Markus was a co-writer of a booklet named Judo Shimushi (practical judo), which defined the combat discipline principles of the time.

Further contribution to the development of Jewish combat doctrine arose as a result of violent encounters between Jewish protests and British policemen (1939). The last used batons to beat Jewish demonstrators, causing injuries and demoralization within the Jewish community (Gross, 2010). These incidents encouraged Hagana members to conduct "combat experiments" to counter the threat of the British batons. The result was the introduction of the short-stick fighting method, which became an integral part of the general face-to-face combat training regimen of the Hagana (Gross, 2010).

The introduction of the short-stick fighting method, along with conceptual transformation from defensive to offensive approach within Jewish organizations led to changing the name of the Israeli combat discipline from Sport Magen to Kapap (Mor & Moriya, 2016).

### **The Development of Krav-Maga in Israel (1948-2020)**

In 1948 the state of Israel was formed together with the IDF, which was based on the infrastructure of the Hagana. Kapap instructors who served in the Hagana were recruited to the IDF (Gross & Nativ 2016).

From 1948 until the late 1950s, we can notice in IDF documents the use of several different terms to describe one combat discipline: Kapap, Sport Magen and Krav-Maga (I.D.F. Archives, 1949) eventually, towards the end of the 1950's, the term Krav-Maga put down roots becoming the accepted term for IDF's hand-to-hand-combat method, displacing all former terms (Ben-Dov, 2015)

Imi Lichtenfeld, who was a prominent hand-to-hand combat instructor in the Hagana and later in the IDF (Ben-Dov, 2015), formed upon his retirement from active service (1964) a new approach towards Krav-Maga training. He introduced new techniques, adopted the judo belt system and created a concept of Krav-Maga as a martial art (Lichtenstein, 2007). Imi opened the door for numerous schools and private organizations to teach Krav-Maga in assorted approaches and techniques all over the world. In-addition Krav-Maga tourism programs emerged and people from around the globe are coming to Israel to train in Krav-Maga (Bar-On Cohen, 2010).

### **Discussion and conclusions**

The question which arises is what does any martial art have to do with ethno-cultural identities? The current answer from the literature is that martial arts practices are privileged areas to observe identity making processes, particularly ethno-national identities where cultural meaning of violence, and the connections to social in-group and out-group interaction, are evident. Martial Arts practice embodies identities, it's their physical manifestation, and

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establishes physical sovereignty, but what does Krav Maga have to do with the sense of Israelisness? We just demonstrated how Krav Maga is tied to the historical processes that led to the formation of the State of Israel. Moreover, if we look closely at it, the technical repertoire of Krav Maga is constructed around the concept of the weak defeating the strong. Perpetrating the myth of the few, weak, ambushed by the stronger many creates social cohesion. Krav Maga offers its Israeli participants resources to build a nationalistic discourse and puts the ethno-religious representation at the top, as it were empowering them with higher moral values. The theme is one of the victories of those who are inferior in number, weapons and strength but superior in courage, faith, and moral values if united. A theme that is also common to the biblical and modern Israeli narrative of cyclical persecution and resilience. The threat does not emanate uniquely from the external enemies of the Jews who unjustly attack them, but also from the socially constructed reality of unreliable hosts and the process of erosion in the 'authentic' values of Zionism and Jewish identity through assimilation.

So why in-spite of the widespread and substantial cultural heritage of Krav-Maga, Israel hasn't considered yet using it as a tool of cultural diplomacy like other countries?

There is no clear answer to this question but several reasons should be considered:

1. Over the years, the Israeli government attempted several times but never succeeded to establish an organization which will be responsible to promote the image of the Jewish state. Because of lack of clarity over the authority of various ministries and other political issues, long term programs were never developed (Yeger, 2005). Currently, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is responsible for representing Israel abroad and promoting its economic, cultural, and scientific relations but the agenda is not clear (Anonymous, 2020).

2. Krav-Maga is still under-researched in the scientific literature. Most available literature is amatorial and only recently some scholarly, peer reviewed, works have emerged.

3. Because of that, it was a shared belief that Krav-Maga was invented by Imi Lichtenfeld as a private enterprise, thus may explain as well why the government decided to distance itself from it and not use a private organization for cultural diplomacy (Anonymous, 2020).

4. Today there are several organizations involved in KM; many of which are for profit (Anonymous, 2020). It is likely that the Israeli government doesn't want to regulate KM due to the complexity of monitoring it and the legal aspects in regulating different private bodies.

In conclusion, governmental lack of ownership over Krav Maga lead to a situation in which *"A lot of schools in Israel, USA, and other places around the world, are teaching all kind of variations of things and they are calling it Krav Maga, because of the marketing power of the name, a lot of these schools, combine BJJ(and sometimes in a bad way) and elements from the world of MMA because it is popular thing to do, but this is not Krav Maga!"* (Anonymous, 2020)

This will eventually transform Krav Maga and cut its connections to the history of the Jewish people and the state of Israel. Israeli authorities' inaction or the lack of will to regulate Krav-Maga will be have serious consequences



Our view is that if Krav-Maga were to become part of the cultural diplomacy of Israel it will create several significant opportunities, besides foreign policy, such as to provide access to Israeli culture and language to foreign people, promote a more positive image of the Jews worldwide, and give the world access to the Israeli people's narrative of the Israeli-Arab conflict.

Following the steps of China, Japan, and Korea, who structured their national martial arts and used them to promote cultural diplomacy, Israel can significantly enhance its public relations and image among people of the world by using Krav-Maga as a diplomacy tool.

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