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Racing against BDS

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Sport is not politics. Sport builds bridges. Sport breaks down barriers. Sport is the way to achieve normalization between people and nations. Citizens whose countries don't have diplomatic relations participate in sport events in each other's countries. This year Israelis participated in an automobile challenge in the United Arab Emirates while Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates sponsored cycle teams in a race in Israel. The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel is fading.

Sylvan Adams the Canadian-Israeli real-estate multi-millionaire, also known as the Godfather of Israeli cycling had a tough job persuading Mauro Vegni, the race director of the Italian Classic Giro d'Italia race to have the first three stages of the 2018 race in Israel. Not because of the BDS movement. Vegni was skeptical because Israel has never been a true cycling nation. Vegni was skeptical because the Giro d'Italia has never been held outside of Europe. After visiting Israel and discussing with cyclists and sponsors Mauro Vegni became the eager advocate of the event insisting that "we do not mix sport with politics" and that this is "the Tour of Peace from Jerusalem to Rome". It will be first time that any of cycling's three major races, the Giro, Tour de France and Vuelta a Espana, will begin outside of Europe.

Significantly his words have resonance of truth for of the 22 teams participating this year in the Giro d'Italia there are teams sponsored by Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates and, two countries that don't have diplomatic ties with Israel. There is also the Israeli team. So in addition to the three day event held in Israel the 22 teams, Israel and Arab and American and European with cyclists from all over the world, will continue to participate and compete in other stages in Europe. They will participate as sportsmen for the sake of sports and not politicians for the sake of politics.

Not surprisingly members of the UAE and Bahrain-Merida team refused to comment on any political situation in Israel when the teams arrived. “We are here for taking part in a sport event, we have no comment on any other issues,” said Andrea Appiani, the communications director for UAE Team Emirates. This was echoed by Bahrain-Merida team spokesperson Ozren Muller who said “We are an international team, we are proud to represent all our nations we come from. Sports can often open frontiers in every sector. We are here just for the sport, we are a world tour team and we are contractually obliged to compete in the world tour.” According to Giro d’Italia race organizers, no riders or teams pulled out of the race due to pressure from the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement

This attitude of sports not politics and rejecting the BDS movement is not a one-off at this event in Israel. Earlier this year Israeli drivers Dani Pearl and Itai Moldavski members of the Pearl Pango Racing Team received an official invitation from the supervisors of Abu Dhabi Desert Challenge off-road automobile race. They entered the United Arab Emirates with Israeli passports, and participated in the event.

The refusal of sportsmen to be dragged into politics and related rhetoric highlights the schism that has emerged between the idealism of the BDS movement and reality on the ground. The BDS movement is fading because it is promulgating lies infused with racism. The BDS movement initiated a #ShameOnGiro hashtag on Twitter while BDS activist Zaid Al-Shoabi expressed anger on behalf of all Palestinian at the Bahrain and UAE teams’ participation. Any support that these might have had has been tarnished by the content. The content is no different from the recent intense anti-Semitic speech by the Palestinians Authority President Abu Mazan.

There is also a schism between the Palestinian National Action Authority and Arab states. The former describes the Bahrain and UAE sponsored teams in the Giro d’Italia race as “a very serious provocation to the feelings of the Palestinian people and the Arab and Islamic nations.” Surely they must realize that Bahrain and the UAE are Arab and Islamic nations; surely they must realize that they are lying for their description is the opposite to that of their actions and feelings!

The most beautiful race in the world, in the most beautiful country in the world will have as many as a billion viewers worldwide. They will see it all because road cycling is a unique sport on the

world stage, as there are no barriers between athletes and spectators, who are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Druze, and Bahia standing together on the road-side to watch the sport teams compete, Arab, Christian and Jewish. Arab states reject BDS as the means for change as seen in this year's Giro d'Italia that shows the race towards normalization is constructive engagement.

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