

KHABIB NURMAGOMEDOV: MANIFESTATION OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND ISLAMIC IDENTITY IN UFC

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary times, public diplomacy is not necessarily facilitated by a state actor, and the diplomatic process could still be interrelated with many sectors, including religion and sports. The Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is one kind of public diplomacy arena in this context. In the UFC, a game of identity is visible under certain conditions, for example, the one at the fighter Khabib Nurmagomedov, who is well known to have a strong Islamic identity. This paper will dig into the manifestation of Islamic identity and public diplomacy in the UFC by Khabib Nurmagomedov from the beginning of his career in 2012 until his retirement. This paper describes the UFC as a public diplomacy arena, including the values it brings. Then proceed with the background of Khabib Nurmagomedov as a UFC fighter with his unique identity. The authors will explain how the symbolism of Islamic identity emerged and played in the UFC, with Khabib Nurmagomedov as the primary focus. In the end, it can be concluded that Khabib Nurmagomedov has provided a unique position for Islamic identity in the UFC.

Keywords: Khabib Nurmagomedov, UFC, public diplomacy, Islamic identity

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary international relations have specific nuances which are pretty different from that before. Previously the various political role, such as diplomacy, was generally done by a framework of state's actions and relations. Nowadays, this role could be implemented almost fully by non-state actors, both as a direct actor who does the diplomacy or indirectly (Lee & Ayhan, 2015). For example, through "fora" in which diplomatic framework is being held. Non-state actors, for instance, multinational companies (MNC), non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and particular individuals could do certain activities that even states are unable to do as good as them (Stephen & Zürn, 2014). For example, because of Taiwan's difficult position in formal international relations, it can use non-state actors to implement its

public diplomacy, such as the organization of Taiwanese indigenous people (Figueira, 2020).

In the sports industry, the public recognizes the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). UFC refers to a US-based MNC which promotes mixed martial arts (MMA) and sporting events that the company holds (Telegraph Sport, 2017). This MNC has a special place in the MMA world and sports because UFC is considered the most successful MMA event holder globally, mainly because of the number of viewers and sponsorships globally (Way of Martial Arts, 2020). Similar to many internationally famous and heavily publicized sports events, athletes who play here often bring and show their backgrounds and identities, for example, those of religion, culture, nationality, and others (Telegraph Sport, 2017).

One of those athletes is Khabib Nurmagomedov. In his position as a UFC fighter, Khabib has a very interesting position and background from the diplomacy perspective. First, in terms of sports, he is the most extended holder of UFC Lightweight Champion in the history of UFC so far (from April 2018 until March 2021); some consider even him the greatest UFC lightweight champion of all time (Zulkofske, 2020). Secondly, in terms of his background, he is a Muslim from Dagestan (a region in Russian Federation). He also often shows his Islamic identity in various instances, whether directly related to UFC fights (e.g., press conferences and statements after winning the match) or not (e.g., social media activities).

Furthermore, this background seems very visible at the UFC 229 in October 2018, where Khabib fought Conor McGregor, a contender for the UFC Lightweight Champion title. Their fights (inside and outside of "the cage") are similar to Huntington's clash of civilizations because of their contrasting identity and background. Khabib represents Islamic or Eastern civilization, and Conor is the one from the West (Zulkofske, 2020).

Based on these postulates, uniqueness appears because of Khabib's clear actions of showing his Islamic identity, particularly during his "golden age" when he still fought to defend his title as UFC Lightweight Champion. Moreover, in the context of public diplomacy, given the position of UFC as a promoter of a famous international event and Khabib as a particular individual who was (and is still relatively) popular in the sports, UFC comes as a facilitator of public diplomacy and Khabib as an actor who did the diplomacy there and representative of a particular identity. These things are also added substantially by the fact that UFC is the most famous MMA promoter in the world, and Khabib had a significant social influence on the world as an athlete (Zulkofske, 2020). With these, we could formulate a research question for this paper as to how are the manifestations of public diplomacy and Islamic identity in UFC, with Khabib Nurmagomedov as a study case in the period October 2018 - March 2021.

This study uses a categorical method of literature review. This method categorizes various literature based on their linkage to the research question. Using this method, we have categorized the literature into two. First, the literature supports

the idea that sports could be used as an instrument of diplomacy. Second, it is the literature that affirms that there is a particular aspect of identity and value that could be played or represented in sports. In the first category, diplomacy often needs a medium to convey, for example, sports, as Deniz Demir Bolçay (2018) argued in *Sports as Public Diplomacy Element*. To him, the necessary application of soft power in international relations makes the government use sports or other important social events.

Zhang Qingmin (2013), in *Sports Diplomacy: The Chinese Experience and Perspective*, also added this idea of sports' function beyond just regular leisure and entertainment. He argues that although technically, sports diplomacy could be employed as a tool to heighten or improve relations between countries, according to the Chinese perspective, only the later usage can be considered sports diplomacy. Later on, John A. Johnson (2018) writes in *Taekwondo and Peace: How a Killing Art Became a Soft Diplomacy Vehicle for Peace*, sports that come from a specific culture could be used as a "vehicle for peace" between countries that also happen to have similarities about this particular culture and sports. In his example, historically speaking, Taekwondo, as a sport that emerged from Korean culture, has been used for a long time as a medium to improve relations between South and North Korea.

Both aspects of soft power and culture linked closely in diplomacy also manifest in how a government wants to improve its country's image and attractiveness internationally through sports. In *Muay Thai Diplomacy: Thailand's Soft Power Through Public Diplomacy* by William J. Jones and Pawinpon Theerawong (2021), they make an example of the Thai government's efforts to promote Muay Thai as an official Olympics sport through public and cultural diplomacy. The connection between sports and a country's culture is one of the main reasons why not all kinds of sports can be utilized to represent a specific country (Mor and Molle, 2021). Guy Mor and Anrea Molle (2021), in *Should The State of Israel Pursue Krav Maga As An Intangible Cultural Heritage of The Jewish People? History and Politics Say Yes*, suggests that Krav Maga embodies Israeli cultural ideas, national historical discourses, and biblical values. Therefore, this martial art could be employed as one of Israel's accepted cultural representation and diplomatic tools.

Even this appropriation of sports as political and diplomatic tools also appears in the domain of contested territories and sovereignty. As Ramesh Ganohariti and Ernst Dijxhoorn (2020) formulate in *Para- and Proto-Sports Diplomacy of Contested Territories: CONIFA as a Platform for Football Diplomacy*, CONIFA as an international sporting platform for contested territories, contributes to their nation branding.

In the second category, sports' ability to create an imagined community serves as a common expression of people that could break social barriers (Devan, 2012). Therefore, in sports, in one way or another, a particular aspect of identity

could be played or represented, including the unifying one. Pamela Devan (2012), in *Cricket and the global Indian identity*, explains how the game of cricket, even though its advent in India is influenced clearly by British colonialism, could become a symbol of Indian identity and community nationally in India and globally.

National identity symbolized in sports is not only just a link or reference to a kind of universally accepted idea or unifier but could, in some sense, reduce hate and improve pride in the identity. In Emilio Depetris-Chauvin and Ruben Durante's (2017) question in *One team, one nation: Football, ethnic identity, and conflict in Africa*, they found that even when there are historical and ethnic cleavages in a country, patriotic shock that comes from the national team winning a football match can reduce ethnic tension. In this case, identity is "played" positively from a conflict standpoint. Not just playing in a positive light, certain kinds of sports that have become widespread cultural phenomena could describe certain notions of a country.

Reagan Flaherty (2010) writes in *Considering Mixed Martial Arts as a Cultural Representation of American Empire* that due to the rapid growth of the UFC, MMA represents the American values of power, hegemony, identity, and capitalism. Also, these values and identities exist not just by themselves; some actors could also profit from them. Jennifer McLaren (2017) proposes in "*We Are All Fighters*": *The Transmedia Marketing of Difference in the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)* how UFC increases its effort to market different fighters in terms of race, gender, sexuality, and nationality to make its event more publicized.

METHODS

This study is within the scope of explanatory-based qualitative research because it explains the cause-and-effect relationship between the existence of Khabib Nurmagomedov in the UFC realm with the manifestation of public diplomacy and Islamic identity. To gain an in-depth understanding of this, the collection of various information as data was carried out by utilizing a literature review on public diplomacy and specific identities in the realm of sports, credible media news texts related to Khabib Nurmagomedov's Islamic identity, which was shown as a UFC fighter, video interviews of Khabib Nurmagomedov with Vladimir Putin as Russian President, a series of Khabib Nurmagomedov press conferences at the UFC, as well as the official social media accounts of the UFC and Khabib Nurmagomedov. The analysis of these various data was based on content analysis which focused on translating and understanding the goals, messages, and effects of Khabib Nurmagomedov's activities as a UFC fighter with a dominant Islamic identity and gesture. Social identity theory and the concept of public diplomacy are used to analyze each factor of Khabib Nurmagomedov's Islamic identity and the effect of public diplomacy on Russia.

Social Identity Theory

Based on this theory, the dynamics between groups are strongly influenced by the social identity of individuals in the group. The identity discussed in this theory refers to the individual's social identity (Jasso, 2003). This arises from an individual's attempt to include himself in a group of individuals with similarities to himself (Stets & Burke, 2000). This social identity provides self-enhancement, contributes to self-conceptualization, and creates self-esteem and status for individuals (Jasso, 2003). When the activation of social identity or salience occurs, the influence of social group membership on individuals increases and impacts depersonalization or a phenomenon where the individual considers himself to be a cognitive representation of his group (Stets & Burke, 2000).

Moreover, Stets & Burke (2000) continue by stressing that this phenomenon causes individuals to do things that increase their in-group ratings relative to their out-groups and social identification. This causes in-group members to view their in-group more positively than their out-group group and conform to the same in-group norms and ideas. According to Hogg, Adelman, and Blagg (2010), this in-group feeling also exists in religious adherents. Religion provides identity in a social group and certainty in viewing the world's life for its adherents. This is quite reasonable because religion provides certain rituals, norms, and views of life, including in the metaphysical realm. Individuals who identify as followers of a particular religion are more conformist to the ideas that unite the in-group.

Public Diplomacy

Traditionally, public diplomacy refers to any diplomacy attempt by a state government to the public. But, with the development of international relations, especially with the increasing influences of non-state actors, there is an appearance of so-called new public diplomacy. This unique concept acknowledges the nuance of modern international relations so that public diplomacy is interpreted as:

an instrument used by states, associations of states, and some sub-state and non-state actors to understand cultures, attitudes, and behavior; to build and manage relationships; and to influence thoughts and mobilize actions to advance their interests and values (Lee & Ayhan, 2015).

It also argues that non-state actors can be an actor in public diplomacy in their rights and represent the aggregate interest of society, even though non-state actors can also operate in the field of diplomacy as partners of state government with interests that follow the latter (Lee and Ayhan, 2015). According to Bolçay (2018), sports are cultural tools belonging to the government that exhibits their cultural practices. The instrumentalization of sports into an international political tool is

through public diplomacy. This method can bridge relations between societies and cultures so that actors can communicate better to convey their message.

Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)

As an MNC, UFC has tried adjusting its operating model to suit its target audience better, namely the international community, which is quite diverse. One of these efforts is a marketing difference between the campaign and the slogan "We are All Fighters". Furthermore, this campaign is followed by presenting UFC fighters who are more diverse in gender, race, and nationality.

Each athlete is presented with individual differences with a slight lean back to more pronounced systemic differences (McLearen, 2017). Given the UFC's position as the most popular and significant MMA promoter globally (Way of Martial Arts, 2020; SportyTell Editors, 2021), it is natural for this MNC to appear more inclusive internationally. Moreover, MMA can be seen as one of the supporting foundations of white nationalism politics (Zidan, 2018). One of the preventive measures to overcome the existence of an MNC image is to maintain "political correctness" among UFC athletes, for example, by preventing athletes who are indicated to have unwanted ideologies from playing and prohibiting brands with extreme political affiliations from sponsoring UFC athletes (Zidan, 2018).

Thus, it can be seen that although it still has a profit motive in carrying out this "inclusive policy" (McLearen, 2017), the UFC tries to present itself as a forum for international sports and cultural events. This policy is undoubtedly conducive for the UFC in the midst of the view that the UFC is an essential microcosm in seeing the existence of the so-called American Empire because of the similarities between the two as entities characterized by power, domination, and capitalism (Flaherty, 2010).

Khabib Nurmagomedov

In such a UFC backdrop appears Khabib Nurmagomedov. His social identity (specifically culture and religion) became a considerable public interest when he became the UFC Lightweight Champion in April 2018 (Abdulrazaq, 2020). Attention to this aspect was heightened when it was decided that Khabib would fight Conor McGregor in October 2018 (Abdulrazaq, 2020). The rivalry between the two fighters developed long before the fight in October 2018 (Rondina, 2018). Khabib and Conor appear to be two contrasting individuals. Khabib is a Russian by nationality, not by ethnicity, devout Muslim, and individually more reserved. Meanwhile, Conor is Irish, liberal, and free-spirited (Baumgartner, 2018; Suchkov, 2019). Even in Russia, Khabib's home country, society is split in two. Conor's supporters represent the more liberal sections of society and the Russian narrative as part of western civilization. Meanwhile, Khabib's supporters represent a more conservative and pro-establishment segment of Russian society (Suchkov, 2019).

This contrast was exacerbated long before their primary battle, through verbal and physical conflicts shown behind the scenes, to the press conference at UFC 229. Conor's opinion of Khabib's manager, Ali Abdelaziz, showed the verbal conflict that he was a terrorist (Murphy, 2019). This is due to Ali Abdelaziz's controversial past. He was imprisoned for being a double agent with the FBI and an informant against the Muslim terrorist group of the Americans (MOA). Through it, Conor used the past of Khabib's manager as a weapon to create a contrast in the rivalry between the two fighters. Physical conflicts before the main event were also found when Conor threw a trolley at the bus carrying Khabib and several other athletes. This incident response to a series of consecutive events resulted from a verbal conflict between Khabib and Artem Lobov, who was Conor's teammate (Murphy, 2019).

This accumulation resulted in an extraordinary fight in October 2018. The fight became one of the most lucrative UFC fights in history, with 2.4 million pay-per-views globally and a total profit of over 17 million USD (Hill, 2018). In addition, Khabib also successfully defended his position as the Lightweight Champion from Conor. This caused the prestige of this Russian fighter to rise internationally. Not only having a "positive" outcome after the fight at home was over, but there was also a brawl between Khabib and Conor and their team. Khabib, who started the incident, reasoned that Conor and his team did trash talk, which was considered insulting to the country, parents, and religion (Hill, 2018).

Khabib's popularity from this accumulation of events has significant relevance to two parties, Muslims of the world and the Russian government. Since this victory, Khabib has been considered by some Muslims a hero (Zulkofske, 2020). Khabib occupies the world's second most popular Muslim athlete (the number one being Egyptian soccer player Mohammed Salah) (Pasha-Zaidi, 2021). Some have compared Khabib to the United States boxer Muhammad Ali (Abdulrazaq, 2020). Apart from his religious identification, this popularity is also greatly influenced by Khabib's behavior which explicitly displays his Islamic identity.

Explicitly, Khabib often shows his Islam through specific actions throughout his career at the UFC. When he was at a press conference, Khabib often said "Alhamdulillah" as a greeting when he wanted to start a conversation (Hussain, 2020). Not stopping at words, at the end of each match, Khabib also often shows himself prostrating in the octagon, which is a manifestation of gratitude and joy. In addition, there is phenomenal symbolism by Khabib, which is carried out from weighing sessions to face-offs at press conferences. His fingers are crossed in front of his chest, then pointing upwards; this symbolism means that Khabib believes that no power comes from oneself but the Creator who gives everything (Hussain, 2020).



Figure 1. Khabib bowing down after the match
(Source: www.mmasucka.com)

Not only related to actions, but Khabib also, on certain occasions, explicitly conveyed his social views. In 2018, Khabib had proposed closing a nightclub in Dagestan after the death of a National Guardsman while breaking up a fight at a nightclub in Dagestan (Ellingworth, 2018). In 2019, Khabib criticized a controversial play in Dagestan called Hunting for Men, which featured women in "inappropriate clothing." This led to the organizers apologizing to the Dagestan public (Zidan, 2020).



Figure 2. Khabib showing off Islamic symbol after weigh-in
(Source: www.sportingnews.com)

The Public Diplomacy

Meanwhile, for the Russian government, Khabib is a suitable medium for public diplomacy. After his victory against Conor, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Khabib. He expressed the Russian government's support for sanctions imposed by the Nevada sports authorities regarding his post-fight brawl with Conor:

"...of course, if we are attacked from the outside, not only you, we could all jump in such a way, and there could be hell to pay" (The Sun, 2018).

Not only in his match with Conor, but Putin also communicated both indirectly (e.g., Putin called Khabib after his victory over Conor (Owens, 2018)) and in direct meetings (e.g., Putin met Khabib and his father Abdulmanap Nurmagomedov (The Sun, 2018)). This relationship existed until Khabib declared his retirement in October 2020 (Russia Today, 2020). The relevance of "Khabib's use" as a political tool of the Russian government is not only because Khabib is a Russian athlete who has had tremendous success in the UFC but also his popularity among Muslims.

Unfortunately, the Caucasus region, where a substantial number of people are Muslims, also experiences relatively high rates of poverty and political instability. It increases the opportunities for Muslims to be exposed to radicalism and join terrorist organizations based on extreme interpretations of Islamic teachings (Suchkov, 2019). According to Suchkov (2019), Khabib as a person from the said region, specifically Dagestan, can be used as a public relations tool for the Russian government domestically to motivate Muslims there (especially young men, who are generally the main target of terrorist recruitment) to avoid from radicalism.

Not only domestically, but Khabib's popularity is also relevant at the international level. Russia is one of the big powers that have interests in the Middle East, one of these interests is maintaining Russia's allied countries (e.g., Syria) (Zidan, 2021). According to Suchkov (2019), Khabib's popularity as an excellent Muslim athlete and devout among Arab youth have also made him once again a tool of Russia as an image in convincing Arab communities that Russia also represents their values (i.e., values that tend to be conservative in general and Islamic in particular, in contrast to western values). This act of politicizing Khabib's popularity is not only carried out by the government of his country since Khabib's victory over Conor in October 2018, but various world leaders also invited the champion to their official events, some of which were the United Arab Emirates and Turkey (Zidan, 2018).

These countries have two things in common: both have a Muslim majority population and still have a poor record of human rights (Menezes, 2020). The United Arab Emirates is a vocal supporter of Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen (an intervention that left thousands dead and millions at risk of starvation) and still mistreats migrant workers. Meanwhile, under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan,

Turkey experienced significant regression regarding press freedom (Menezes, 2020). According to Karim Zidan (2018), this effort can be categorized as sports washing, which means using sports by a political entity to divert the international public's attention from human rights violations in the said political entity.

Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC)

In the context of MNC, the primary motivation of these activities is profit, both in the short term (e.g., increasing the company's income and shareholder's stock value) and long term (e.g., keeping the company's brand and reputation, relations with consumers). In the case of UFC, the marketing strategy of UFC explains this motivation enough. This strategy tries to represent the diversity of the target audience in the athletes' characteristics and backgrounds (McLearen, 2017). Besides being an active public diplomacy actor, UFC's position as the most popular MMA promoter in the world can turn this company into a "forum and medium" for public diplomacy. Generally, sports bring people together across geographic, linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries (Boļçay, 2018). Because of this universality, we can consider sports an essential and effective asset for sending messages to foreign audiences (Garamvölgyi et al., 2020).

This capability appears because of the international popularity of UFC, which comes from its various sports events. The popularity of sports events can make political actors use these events for non-sports purposes. One kind of this usage is through a partnership between political actors and actors who hold the sports event, which does not always state actors or political actors themselves (Garamvölgyi et al., 2020). Practically, UFC cannot become an arena for public diplomacy on all occasions and possibilities. It is necessary to have another variable that can add this public diplomacy function to the sports event. An example of this variable is athlete's popularity (Garamvölgyi et al., 2020). Therefore, the idea that UFC can become an arena for public diplomacy presupposes the existence of this variable. Khabib is the variable. He is an entity that turns UFC into a medium for public diplomacy. In the end, UFC has two roles in public diplomacy. First is an active independent actor with its agenda. Second is a passive actor used by third parties as a medium to convey their messages.

Khabib Nurmagomedov

As the most critical factor in instrumentalizing UFC into a public diplomacy tool, Khabib has certain traits (e.g. popularity and image) that make sense as to why he plays a role in this instrumentalization. However, it does not mean that Khabib deliberately has this agenda. As previously explained, Khabib's public diplomacy tendency only significantly appears when he successfully defends his champion status against Conor McGregor. Before this match or Khabib's succession into UFC Lightweight Champion, the public diplomacy tendency of the Russian athlete barely existed.

Even in early Khabib's participation in UFC, he was just an athlete with a particular personality and background. So, with these in mind, it can be concluded that the public diplomacy role that lands on Khabib and is influenced by Khabib is an effect of his success in UFC, not his intention from the beginning. Therefore, we conclude that in this context, Khabib is an individual who occupies this position because of a particular set of opportunities and factors. Arguably, the most important factor which influenced Khabib's role as a catalyst of the instrumentalization of UFC into a public diplomacy tool is his' religious background.

Although sports of the world, including UFC itself, do not have a lack Muslim players, Khabib has significance in the international context of Muslim athletes. It is because of his explicit showing of religious practices; even his religious practices are seen as conservative. This contrasts with other athletes, notably in his rivalry with Conor McGregor.

Khabib himself is not the only Muslim fighter competing in the UFC. Muslim fighters include Kamaru Usman, Belal Muhammad, Khamzat Chimaev, and Islam Makhacev. However, Khabib has what other Muslim fighters do not have, namely the prestige that is conveyed through other fighters who are often the highlight of the media and his ability in the octagon, which is always considered to dominate to create a winning record without ever losing in his professional MMA career with a record of 29 wins and undefeated (Lee, 2018). For example, during his ceremonial weigh-in at UFC 229, Khabib said a phenomenal sentence that he would beat Conor in front of his fans who filled the building at that time:

"...hey, first of all, I wanna say Alhamdulillah! God gave me everything. Alhamdulillah, I know you got this and don't like this! Alhamdulillah! Tomorrow night I'm gonna smash your boy guys"
(Lee, 2018).

We can consider Khabib's position here as a celebrity diplomat. According to Young (2018), a celebrity diplomat is not a trained diplomat who represents the state in its entirety but a popular individual who concentrates on a particular issue and creates exploit in the issue through massive publication. As a celebrity diplomat, Khabib often utters iconic sentences that make him a Muslim figure and has a significant contribution to MMA sports. One sentence that will always be remembered is when Khabib said not to mock one's religion, country, and parents. This was addressed to the media due to the MMA community deploring the commotion created by Khabib after his fight against Conor. Khabib argues that no one has a problem with Conor's trash talk, but Khabib considers that it is not sportsmanship when it becomes personal. He argues that MMA departs from the attitude of respect for fellow fighters, and the trash talk spoken by Conor is considered excessive and too private by offending Khabib's religion, state, and parents (Beydoun, 2018). Thus, as a celebrity diplomat, Khabib, as a Muslim figure, significantly influences mutual respect for fellow fighters who compete in the UFC,

as he said after the press conference of UFC 229 about his actions that caused the riots:

“...I’m a human being, but I don’t understand how people can talk about jumping on the cage when he talks about my religion, he talked about my country, he talks about my father, and he comes to Brooklyn, and he broke the bus and almost killed a couple of people. What about this?” (Beydoun, 2018).

His strong pieces of advice of not insulting one’s religion, country, and parents seemed positively received by the Muslim community he is part of. He is seen as humble, proud of his Muslim identity, and not afraid to stand up against "bullies". Especially given current international public discourse, it allows itself to be penetrated by many ideas and opinions that could be considered racist, Islamophobic, and other xenophobia (Hammond, 2018).

Moreover, his involvement in the UFC also influenced the change in public sentiment about Islamophobia. Conor McGregor’s blatant discredit of Islamic values (for example, offering alcohol by force to Khabib) is a form of Islamophobia at UFC through a press conference at UFC 229. In this case, the presence of Khabib Nurmagomedov in the UFC affects sentiment as a result of Islamophobia is symbolically shown through public views, as well as his actions which are considered as the success of his religiosity towards Islamic values.

The Public Diplomacy

The use of sports events as a state’s attempt to do public diplomacy is not a post-cold war phenomenon. One of the most important examples is the 1936 Summer Olympics in Germany. Nazi government at the time promoted white supremacy and prohibited the participation of Jewish athletes from all countries. In the end, this racist and anti-semitic policy was softened by allowing the involvement of a few Jewish athletes (Glosniak, 2017). But, a little different from using sports as a political tool in general, in this case, political actors are not only using sports events but also MNC (i.e., UFC) dan individual actors (i.e., Khabib) for their schedule. This action has particular theoretical implications for this instrumentalization. Firstly, the decrease of UFC’s and Khabib’s agency capacities and political wills, so these actors can easier be controlled by another political actor who is more powerful and experienced in fighting its agenda.

Secondly, we know that powers belong to UFC and Khabib. Powers manifest in their ability to spread their images through management and marketing skills for UFC or a unique individual persona for Khabib. Accumulating these two makes the instrumentalization of these two by political actors into public diplomacy more profitable, although not always in the literal monetary sense. As explained previously, Khabib is the most critical factor in this instrumentalization. The importance of Khabib causes the process of instrumentalization to be limited to political actors with particular interests in the athlete. Russian (the state and

government) and Muslim people are understandably two kinds of actors because of their background as entities from which Khabib comes. The instrumentalization also influences the position of the UFC as an MNC.

Vekasi (2017) considers these actions by MNCs are public diplomacy. According to her, the intensity of public diplomacy by MNC depends on the risk intensity which happens on the MNC; the scale of public diplomacy also has to be appropriate to the consequence of operation in a business environment that is not too friendly. One of the outputs of this public diplomacy, according to her, is Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). This puts the economic actor as an active cross-border actor with a quasi-foreign policy (Vekasi, 2017). In addition, there are similarities in the image of the Russian government with Khabib in the international public, especially in countries with Muslim majority populations. Both are considered voices of conservative ideals such as respect for traditional values and obedience to authority (Zidan, 2020b). This equation is undoubtedly reinforced by the contrast between Khabib and the Russian government with their so-called biggest rivals, namely Conor McGregor and the United States, which are considered more representative of liberal values (Baumgartner, 2018).

For Muslim people, Khabib successfully represented the image of two communities or people. They are the image of Dagestani Muslims (and Russian Muslims in general) and Muslim fighters of UFC. He represented the idea that these two communities - united by their religious similarity - are as capable as any other people in the world of being hardworking and disciplined people who could achieve prestige and deserved respect. In particular, Dagestani Muslims (and Russian Muslims in general) represent those who feel they are left behind in their own country because they have different cultures and live historically, not politically stable places (Ellingworth, 2018). Khabib tells an image of Islam and Russia that was built through competition in the UFC peacefully. The competitive and sportive UFC evidence this matches through a journey that is considered quite brilliant. This Islamic aspect is also quite strong if we remember that Khabib is sometimes seen as a "representation" of Russian Muslims and as a Muslim of the world (Abdulrazaq, 2020). Thus, this proves the role of Khabib Nurmagomedov as a representative of those communities on the UFC stage with a good image.

In the end, Khabib's fight with McGregor shows that Islamic fighters can dominate a sport that has never been before. This dominance is the result of public diplomacy that also represents Russia as a country with athletes with abilities that effectively portray devout Muslims as committed, hardworking, and successful people. Thus, it improves the image of Islam and Russia for the better by increasing public sympathy for the Islamic identity of Khabib Nurmagomedov.

Then, as explained earlier, several countries other than Russia (both the state and people with particular religious affiliation) do sports washing through Khabib. Their sports washing action also relies on Khabib's image as a devout Muslim and a good athlete. But clearly, the scale of sports washing carried out by various state

actors is not as large as that done by the Russian government. In addition to playing a role in sports washing, the Russian government's use of Khabib, in general, is quite reasonable and exciting. Because this athlete inadvertently gave a political advantage to the Russian government and later had no plans made from the start regarding the former's political instrumentalization. Therefore, this usage of Khabib is not "very costly" for the Russian government.

At first, Khabib was "under the radar" of the Russian government. But as his popularity increases, the Russian government uses this athlete as part of the international projection of this country's image. In addition, despite or because of his level of popularity, Khabib has never occupied a fairly crucial position in the realm of public diplomacy in particular or diplomacy in general. This can be seen when compared to certain athletes whose relevance to Khabib has been compared. For example, the US government uses Muhammad Ali to persuade African countries to boycott the 1980 Moscow Olympics and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to free American captives (Hauser, 2012). This may be explained because, despite being close with various influential politicians at the international and national levels (Suchkov, 2019) and having strong opinions about many things, as in the Charlie Hebdo case (Menezes, 2020) and views related to Women (Watson, 2018), Khabib in action is more apolitical. Despite having been offered various political positions in Russia (Zidan, 2020a; Zidan, 2021), he still has no interest in politics (RT Sport MMA, 2020)

After all, Khabib is not a traditional diplomat but an athlete who, coincidentally due to his popularity and religious background, becomes part of the international projection of ideas and people of the same culture and religion with him through public diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

It is essential to have a more diverse representation of international Islamic identity, especially representation through a more unifying and universal medium, such as sports. Although there is no lack of supply of talented Muslim athletes in the world's sports, this supply is often overrepresented in some sectors and underrepresented in others. In the UFC, Khabib Nurmagomedov, a Dagestani Russian whose religion is Islam, has provided a unique projection of his religion in cage fighting in particular and to the international public in general. Despite his extreme opinions about certain things and lack of action related to public diplomacy, he is still an athlete with much potential for public diplomacy. Unfortunately, his retirement from the UFC, for now, makes us less able to see the instrumentalization of his public diplomacy for the foreseeable future.

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