Israel’s Cultural Diplomacy: The Eurovision Song Contest as Battleground
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When the Israeli singer Netta Barzilai won the 2018 Eurovision Song Contest with a poppy beat and a funky chicken dance, Prime Minister Netanyahu sent a celebratory tweet: "Netta, you brought a lot of honor to the State of Israel." The singer was celebrated as a national hero, not only for winning the campy annual European competition, but also for giving Israel the right to host next year’s contest, creating an opportunity for public and cultural diplomacy.

Understanding that public opinion on international affairs and citizens’ views of other countries can potentially push states to adjust their foreign policy, governments increasingly include public diplomacy – direct communications with foreign publics – into their diplomatic interactions. Cultural diplomacy, part of public diplomacy, includes participation in international cultural events. Countries hope that by seeing as part of a larger community in a fun context (sports competitions, film festivals etc.) and by making a positive impression at these events, negative opinions might soften, and a positive image of the country is established. A recent example is North Korea dispatching its cheerleading dance troupe to the Winter Olympics 2018. The move had at least a short-term effect: In contrast to the usual critical coverage focusing on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program and its human rights record, international media showed images of happy young performers cheering on the DPRK’s athletes.

Israel, too, is using tools of cultural diplomacy. Israeli officials celebrate successes of its nationals in international endeavors, from sports wins to internationally successful TV programs, with the goal to project a positive image to international audiences. Musicians and artists receive funding for international tours, giving foreign audiences a glimpse of “Israel beyond the
conflict.” Israel has not always embraced public diplomacy and some still criticize the government for not providing the necessary resources for it. Still, whether official policy or not, the current government is making international victories by Israelis their own, as the exuberant response to Netta’s Eurovision win demonstrates.

Increasing awareness of the importance of public diplomacy on the Israeli side coincides with growing support for the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) Movement against Israel that originated in Palestinian society and has gained traction in some European countries and on U.S. college campuses. One prong of the BDS campaign is a call for a cultural boycott, demanding that international artists refuse to perform in Israel because it would support the normalization of occupation.

Israel’s cultural diplomacy and BDS efforts are therefore coming to a head in the 2019 Eurovision Song Contest. This event gives us the opportunity to assess in real time the battleground of cultural diplomacy in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Using the 2019 Eurovision as a case study, this paper will review the parallel development of Israel’s cultural engagement with the world and the pushback from cultural boycott supporters. Despite its campy and kitschy character, the Eurovision has been politicized in the past, including in response to Israeli participation or Israeli wins. But I expect 2019 to be more political than ever. In part that is because of better coordination and publicity of the BDS movement. But the other part is Israeli policy relating to cultural diplomacy. I argue that by linking successes of Israeli culture to the image and even legitimacy of the nation, the Israeli government in fact allows BDS campaigns to sting more. If the state makes its artists ambassadors of the state, boycotting their shows becomes politically relevant. If performing in
Israel is interpreted by the Israeli government and people as a sign of political support, then a no-show has political meaning, too.