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KRAV MAGA

HISTORY, REPRESENTATION, AND GLOBALIZATION OF A SELF-DEFENSE SYSTEM FROM ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT

Krav maga ('close combat') is a 'no-rules' self-defense practice, which has over the last thirty years become increasingly popular in gyms, martial art dojos, and combat sports centers all over the world. My research shows how stereotypes of 'Israeliness' and myths of an undefeated Israel Defense Force (IDF) have become key elements of krav maga's global promotion. The article describes how first-generation instructors react to krav maga's global increase in popularity, a dynamic I understand as a form of 'solidification'. This article provides a cultural studies approach mapping out the various tropes that produce krav maga as a globally recognizable signifier for self-defense.

INTRODUCTION

Krav maga (Hebrew ‘close combat’, literally ‘touch fighting’) is a practice of ‘no-rules’ self-defense, which has become increasingly popular in recent decades.¹ Krav Maga classes are nowadays offered at fitness gyms, university sports centers, and martial arts schools. It is advertised as teaching simple and easy techniques that work in uncontrollable violent environments [Imi and Yanilov 2003]. Imi Lichtenfeld (1910–1998), a Jewish wrestler and boxer from Bratislava, developed krav maga during his time in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and made it available to civilians in 1964. A few decades later, krav maga has turned into a global brand that is often associated with practical yet dirty fighting techniques. This article analyzes its increase in popularity. Along with studying the literature, including its paratexts [Genette 1991], I base this study on my personal experience as a krav maga student in five different schools in the US, Canada, Germany, Austria, and Israel, as well as on a sequence of semi-structured interviews with around 35 practitioners and teachers. My interest in krav maga at this point is not primarily phenomenological [for such an approach, see: Cohen 2010], but using rather a discursive analysis to show how mytho-histories [Malkki 1995] produce bodily practices and how embodied exercises reinforce mytho-histories.

I will first introduce krav maga’s history and its globalization utilizing interviews with some of its prominent founding figures. In a second step, I will look at how the practice is represented and promoted today. This will demonstrate the ways in which self-defense practice concepts are linked to muscular Judaism, mytho-histories about Israel’s defensive military, and stereotypes about ‘Israeliness’. Finally, I will show how the global proliferation of krav maga as a signifier for self-defense has caused some instructors to solidify their style as the only ‘real’ krav maga.

HISTORY OF KRAV MAGA²

It is widely accepted today that Emrich (Imi) Lichtenfeld (1910–1998), also called Imi Sde-Or, was the founding figure of krav maga. Lichtenfeld was born in Budapest in 1910 but grew up in Bratislava, where his father established one of the first gyms in what was then Czechoslovakia. Lichtenfeld trained, competed, and achieved international championships in gymnastics, boxing, and wrestling.

With the increasing number of Jewish settlements in Palestine, new immigrants started to organize in a paramilitary fashion leading to the establishment of the Hagana (‘the defense’), the first armed unit in 1920. People such as Gershon Kofler, Yehuda Marcus, and Moshe Feldenkrais (who is otherwise better known for the Feldenkrais methods, an alternative therapeutic body exercise system), were vital for the formation of kapap (*Krav panim el panim* ‘face to face combat’). This combat system taught stick fighting as well as the principles of jiu-jitsu, boxing, and wrestling. In 1944 two years after Lichtenfeld had immigrated to Palestine, he started to work as a combat instructor in the Hagana, where he taught Jewish settlers in hand-to-hand combat. This included techniques of knife fighting and knife defense techniques. After creating Israel’s state in 1948 and the subsequent unification of the Hagana into the Israeli Defense Force (IDF), kapap and krav maga were adopted by the army. In the early 1950s, Lichtenfeld took on the head instructor’s post in the Infantry and School of Combat Fitness of the IDF, where he taught close combat and physical training. During these years, Lichtenfeld systematically developed krav maga.

In 1964 Lichtenfeld left the army and started to teach krav maga to civilians in two locations: Tel Aviv and Netanya. Initially, he kept the military-style dress code in his school but later began to use judo uniforms instead. Lichtenfeld also divided the krav maga curriculum into separate units, which corresponded to a belt system modeled after traditional judo. From then onwards, specific techniques needed to be trained and mastered to progress and receive a graduation belt. This teaching method stayed in place until around 1984 when the krav maga curriculum was reformed by Lichtenfeld and Eyal Yanilov. Under the Israeli sports authorities’ auspices, Lichtenfeld taught three instructor training courses at the Wingate Institute for Physical Education and Sport (Netanya) in 1972, 1975, and 1976. These six-week long courses produced the first generation of KM teachers in Israel.

1 This, however, excludes the Islamic World, where krav maga schools are rarely found. A good visualization of this distribution is provided by the IKMF page showing its locations worldwide: <https://kravmaga-ikmf.com/locations/>

2 I want to thank Eyal Yanilov and Avi Moyal, who commented on an earlier version of this subchapter. I also would like to thank Dafna Inbar for helping me with the interviews in Hebrew.

In 1978 Lichtenfeld established the Israeli Krav Maga Association (IKMA), a non-profit public benefit organization to teach civilians. In Israel, such organizations need at least 11 members to have non-profit status and to become eligible for public donations. Therefore, Lichtenfeld assembled 10 of his senior students to create the IKMA, which became the first krav maga organization. In 1984, however, the IKMA's first split occurred when Yaron Lichtenstein, one of Lichtenfeld's earliest students, left the Israeli Krav Maga Association to form his organization called BUKAN. In 1987 another former student of Lichtenfeld, Eli Avikzar, opened a new branch of krav maga called Krav Magen Israeli (KAMI). According to Eyal Yanilov, who was present at the meeting, the split occurred due to a disagreement between Lichtenfeld and Avikzar on issues regarding the curriculum. Following the dispute, Avikzar founded KAMI, a form of krav maga with a stronger emphasis on judo and aikido. Avikzar also trademarked the name Krav Magen Israeli to assure quality control (see below). Whatever dispute had taken place, it was settled later, as Lichtenfeld graduated Avikzar to an 8th degree black belt in the year 1996.

Lichtenfeld continued to consult with heads of the krav maga training program in the IDF during the 60s and the 70s. In the late 80s, one of Yanilov's students was appointed chief krav maga instructor within the IDF. From this moment onwards, civilian and special forces training directly influenced the army programs from where it had originated. This produced a circular movement which has lasted until today. Civil krav maga practices and developments are reintroduced into the IDF training program, and IDF techniques are taught in courses. When the first intifada (1987-1993) started to sweep across the green line, it increased the demand for individual self-defense in Israel, helping krav maga to more popularity.

The Split of the IKMA and the Diversification of Krav Maga

According to my conversations with Eyal Yanilov (president of Krav Maga Global, KMG) and Avi Moyal (president of International Krav Maga Federation, IKMF), the first half of the 1990s saw many conflicts amongst Lichtenfeld's senior students. As stated by Yanilov, some of the problems had arisen due to mismanagement, disagreements about the curriculum, and a poorly organized instructor course which had been taught in the year 1992 by Imi Lichtenfeld, Haim Zut, and Haim Gidon (two of his senior students). The fallout from this course led to a variety of arguments that produced unbridgeable disagreements, causing the breakup of the IKMA in 1995. Avi Moyal remembers that after his return from the army (1985-1990), the senior instructors around Lichtenfeld had already splintered into different fractions. The dispute pertained to differences concerning particular techniques (mainly gun-defenses) and the curriculum's arrangement. In an attempt to bring

people back together, Lichtenfeld made Moyal the new secretary of the IKMA. Today, Moyal says that Lichtenfeld picked him because his five-year absence in the army had kept him from taking sides with regard to the infighting.

The actual split of the IKMA occurred during a budget meeting in December 1995, which led to the creation of three separate groups: 1. The International Krav Maga Federation (IKMF) was established a year later in 1996 and organized, amongst others, by Gabi Noah, Avi Moyal, and Eyal Yanilov. 2. The remains of the IKMA, were taken over by Haim Gidon and his students who rebranded it under the name Gidon System. 3. Haim Zut Krav Maga and Kapap, which was established by Haim Zut (1935-2020). The events that led to this split are contentious. In interviews with Eyal Yanilov, Avi Moyal, and Haim Gidon – who were all present at the 1995 meeting – I heard different versions of why the IKMA split. They agree, however, that Haim Zut (who was also present at the meeting) provided the most accurate description of the reasons for the break on his homepage:

The main subjects of contention were the management of the organization, differences in opinion over the efficacy of techniques, struggles over individual stature. These internal conflicts became the impetus for the creation of several splinter organizations teaching Krav Maga with and without quality control.

['History', n.d.]

By 1996, 32 years after Lichtenfeld decided to leave the army and teach krav maga to civilians, the system had split into five different groups foregrounding different styles and techniques. This fracture of a formerly more or less homogeneous community, originally united by its founder Imi Lichtenfeld, led many instructors to foreground their styles as the only proper one and the only one that could be life-saving in a violent altercation.

Krav Maga Goes Global

Processes of globalization are marked by an increasing speed of movement of goods and communications. These trigger deterritorialization processes [Deleuze and Guattari 2013] and dynamics of flows [Appadurai 2016], which, in the case of krav maga, help the detachment of individual practices from spatial locations [Woodward 2014]. As we have seen, the globalization of krav maga was not the reason for the shattering of a unified krav maga body. Splits had already occurred before going global. Its international success, however, leads, in the eyes of many, to what Žižek calls a 'demise of symbolic efficiency' [Žižek 2000: 388]. This absence of any central commission exacerbated

differences. It caused various groups to foreground differences in technique and lineage for the sake of making their version of krav maga stand out on the market (what I will describe as dynamics of solidification below).

Curiously, the globalization of krav maga is directly connected to a weight-loss method called *SlimFast*. Daniel Abraham, the CEO of *SlimFast*, had moved to Israel around the late 1970s, where he trained with Raffael Elgarisi, a senior instructor under Lichtenfeld in the IKMA. According to Yamilov, Abraham was impressed and organized a group of 6 IKMA instructors to visit the US and present krav maga to US-American Jewish communities. In 1981 Abraham paid for a five-week-long trip where Lichtenfeld and five students (Yamilov, Barak, Avikzer, Elgarisi, and Maymon) visited Jewish Community Centers in 11 different cities in the US and even appeared on TV. Yamilov and Maymon were also invited to demonstrate at the FBI headquarters in New York City and Quantico.

Abraham also organized the first group of martial arts students and instructors from the US to fly to Israel and take part in a six-week-long instructor course in Netanya taught by Maymon and Yamilov. These individuals started teaching in the US, which was the beginning of krav maga's spread in North America. While some instructors started their own organization, others stayed affiliated with the IKMA. One of the most prominent organizations in the US today is Krav Maga Worldwide (KMW, led by Daren Levine), associated with the IKMF until 1999. KMW instructors, for example, would receive their diplomas through the IKMF and both organizations worked together on promotion videos. However, a rift emerged between the two groups when KMW started to teach what some in the IKMF saw as 'technical mistakes' in the field of gun defenses. The split resulted in a lawsuit that unfolded between the KMW and the IKMF concerning the use of the krav maga logo. The IKMF represented by Yamilov eventually won the case. It is not clear how KMW sees this rift, as Darren Levine, the head of the KMW, was not available for a statement.

Around the beginning of the 1990s, krav maga began to emerge as an international project. While the first krav maga school had already opened in Paris in 1988 under the auspices of the IKMA (taught by Richard Douieb), the IKMF systematically expanded in Europe. In the middle of the 1990s, Yamilov started to teach in Scandinavian countries. In 2010, Yamilov split from the IKMF and established his branch called Krav Maga Global (KMG). While Moyal (IKMF) and Yamilov (KMG) have different opinions on this split's origins, both agree that personal, organizational, and financial issues were the main reasons.

Due to the various schools, branches, and locations, it is not easy to know how many people study krav maga today. Avi Moyal told me that

the IKMF has around 4000 instructors worldwide, and Eyal Yamilov estimates that there are about 1500 instructors in KMG, each teaching approximately 20 to 30 students. Most of these instructors and schools are outside Israel. For example, Krav Maga Worldwide has no Israeli branch, KMG has ten active instructors in Israel, and the IKMF has only 16. Only KAMI has more instructors in Israel (around 350) than abroad (about 50). This is significant when we consider the global promotions of krav maga.

PROMOTING KRAV MAGA IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

When we speak of representations, we often seem to think that some entity out there is represented in one way or another. In what follows, I want to argue differently and emphasize how there is no Archimedean point where we would be able to 'neutrally' look at krav maga as an entity traveling through time and space. On the contrary, it tends to stand in for many (at times conflicting) interpretations that clash or complement each other on the global market. De-essentializing krav maga, both as a practice and a discursive name, is not merely an academic exercise. Instead, it shows that when dealing with martial arts and self-defense, we never really only talk about punching, kicking, and (in the case of krav maga) biting.

Krav Maga as the Essence of 'Israeliness'³

In 2017, the *New York Times* published an article on krav maga featuring (among others) Paul Szyarto, a US businessman, fitness coach, and the producer of a documentary film on the Israeli self-defense system. In the article, Szyarto is quoted saying that for him, the hand combat system 'encapsulates the essence of Israeliness: resourcefulness, versatility, and a mindset of doing whatever it takes to win' [New York Times 30 Dec. 2017]. The *New York Times* article does not provide any further explanation of Szyarto's interpretation of the somewhat ambiguous term 'Israeliness'. Another interview featuring the self-proclaimed fitness CEO sheds light on his understanding of the link between krav maga and the Israeli people:

The Israeli people are incredibly resilient [...] Their history, for thousands of years, has been one of survival, whether in places like Bratislava or the Jerusalem Hills. They hate fighting, yet they often face no choice. And if they must fight, they do so with a sense of ethics and fearlessness that prevents bad

³ 'Israeliness' is, of course, quite a contentious political concept and thus has been marked as such by my use of the inverted comma.

decisions and outcomes. We can apply the same Krav Maga principles to everyday situations in our own lives as police officers, soldiers, athletes, and executives [...] Krav Maga is a self-defense system that perfectly encapsulates the three-fold mindset that is the Israeli way of life: Lethal violence only as a last resort, meticulous preparedness, and fearless, purposeful, constant action under great pressure.
[Cult Hub 10 Dec. 2017]

To Szyarto, Israelis are a distinct group whose way of life is marked by an involuntary martial identity. As a system of defensive attacks that skillfully neutralize an aggressor. Krav maga thus emerges as the bodily habitus of a thousand-year-old people who have no other choice than to fight. In other words, Israelis are ethical and fearless in the face of outside aggression.

Such and similar statements do not exist in a void but are characteristic for a whole discourse that explains krav maga as inherently Israeli. Guy Mor, a professor at Shanghai University of Sport, for example, argues that it should be declared an 'intangible cultural heritage of Israel' as it 'underpins a sense of Israeli national identity' [Mor 2019a: 295-296]. Mor also connects self-defense practices to Israeli culture and calls for more research on how krav maga is 'linked to the cultural heritage of the Jewish people' [Mor 2019a: 295]. However, a straightforward association between an Israeli people and krav maga's *telos* as their bodily expression outside nationalist projections is difficult to maintain.

Historians of nationalism have shown how relatively recently invented traditions often appear in ancient identities' guise [Gellner 1972, Anderson 2006, Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012]. With the rise of nationalism around the nineteenth-century, historians were eager to fill large gaps between ancient times and the modern era. Their work helped produce a nation's continuous history, shuffle former societal taxonomies, and build new associations based on shared identities such as language or religion. Since Zionism and notions of a homogenous community have their roots in European nationalism, the historical *telos* of a Jewish people as a distinct thousand-year-old ethnic group is also contested [Sand and Lotan 2010, Sternhell 2009]. Similarly, 'Israeliness' – like any other 'imagined community' [Anderson 2006] – is a somewhat elusive concept. The sociologist Baruch Kimmerling writes in his book *The Invention and the Decline of Israeliness* [Kimmerling 2005] that while the Yishuv society (pre-Israel Jewish communities in Palestine) might once have been relatively homogenous, the incoming of settlers, as well as the treatment of the Arab population, made questions about 'who is an Israeli' and what constitutes 'Israeliness' in a moot point. Separated into several different cultures, languages, and religious practices, 'Israeliness' fails as an encompassing description of the people living within the (contested) borders of Israel and, thus, as a way to describe krav maga.

To understand Szyarto's and Mor's explanations of krav maga as 'the essence of Israeliness' or as a 'cultural heritage of Israel', we need to look at discourses of 'muscular Judaism', a term emerging towards the end of the 19th century. Presner traces this image of the firm (masculine) muscular Jewish body back to the second Zionist Congress in 1898 when Max Nordau, Theodor Herzl's physician, called for a new orientation in physical and moral strength, which he considered necessary for a Zionist return to Palestine [Presner 2007: 1]. The aim of 'muscular Judaism' was to rebrand the Jewish community as a martial people, with the ability to protect their personal and national interests in the advent of Zionism. This political and aesthetic project was linked to canonized Jewish heroes, such as Samson or Judas Maccabeus (Lichtenfeld's second krav maga school in Netanya was called 'Samson Gym'). However, the new Jewish manliness was also a contentious category, as it built on stereotypes of east European Jewry. While eastern communities were considered 'authentic' Jewish in keeping with Judaic traditions, they were simultaneously also imagined as too physically weak for a nationalistic Zionist endeavor. For Presner, the birth of the muscular Jew, therefore, lies at an uncomfortable crossroads between social Darwinist and nationalist discourses [Presner 2007: 4]. This masculinity crisis is not unique to the Jewish body but has its parallel in the ideology of muscular Christianity, similarly emerging towards the end of the 19th century. Muscular Christianity also turned towards physical fitness and increasingly portrayed Jesus as an athlete instead of an ascetic [Greve 2018]. Discourses on muscular Christianity likely influenced muscular Judaism [Mor 2019b].

In one of his earlier works, Slavoj Žižek tackles how what he calls nodal points can organize a relatively heterogeneous field (such as in our case, 'Israeliness'). In his 1989 piece 'Che Vuoi?' he describes a process in which the brand Marlboro serves as a nodal point to connote and provide a specific ideological vision of America. 'America' as a term standing in for various meanings and representations (similar to 'Israeliness'), thus was organized in the Marlboro campaign as, for example, the land of the free, adventurous cowboys, and unlimited possibilities. In Žižek's example, Marlboro unifies the heterogeneous associations with 'America' into a more homogenous field of references [Žižek 1989: 105-108]. Similarly, Szyarto and Mor organize an ambivalent 'Israeliness' into a more coherent set through the nodal point of krav maga. The self-defense system thus provides a link between Israeli national identity and Israel's military culture. Presner elaborates on this when he writes that particularly the 1967 war proved that 'Jewishness' was not associated with physically weak intellectuals anymore, but with decisive and muscular 'Tzabar' Jews (men and women born in the land of Israel and the British Mandate of Palestine), who were heroically fighting for their country. '[B]eing-Jewish-in-the-world' became 'characterized by toughness, aggressiveness, and battle-readiness', and krav maga was the way to make this known globally

[Presner 2007: xvii]. When Szyarto and Mor speak of krav maga, they speak of more than merely a variety of kicks and punches. For them, it condenses 'Israeliness' with its readiness to fight, its offense-defense, and its culture of civilian-militarism [Kimmerling 2005]. Understanding Israeli identity through krav maga, we will see in the following, is produced on the backdrop of Jewish-Palestinian conflicts and the exclusion of Arabs living in Israel.

Krav Maga as the Art of the Underdog and Military Oppression

Aside from discourses of involuntary martial people, krav maga is also often promoted as the underdog's art. According to many who knew him personally, Lichtenfeld used his fighting skills to protect the small Jewish community from anti-Semites and Nazi attacks in Bratislava. Tropes of emancipating and protecting the weak are thus tied to the system's foundational myth. In the following, I will show another metonymical link where krav maga's emancipatory potential is associated with individual nationalistic interpretations of Israel's military power. However, such and similar tropes conceal how krav maga is also utilized in the Palestinian people's oppression in the occupied territories. To first establish what I mean when speaking of an 'underdog trope', I will use the help of a famous Hollywood depiction of krav maga.

The thriller *Enough* [2002] with Jennifer Lopez portrays an abusive relationship. In it, Slim, a waitress, is physically and mentally mishandled by her husband, Mitch, who threatens to take her daughter away. Slim flees from her husband and tries to get the help of a lawyer who informs her that no legal procedure exists that would protect her from the influence of her well-connected husband. Cornered and afraid of losing her daughter, Slim sees no other way than to fight Mitch physically. But Slim has only one month until she will have to face Mitch again in a custody hearing. In other words, the waitress has to learn how to fight a bigger and stronger opponent within a matter of a few weeks. The typical protagonist-turns-fighter montage shows various characteristic krav maga techniques, including knees to the groin, choke escapes, and eye gouges. The montage is accompanied by a dialogical voiceover featuring a conversation between Slim and her instructor, in which the two reflect on some of the mental lessons taught. *Enough* climaxes in a violent altercation between Slim and her abusive husband in which she utilizes her new skills to defeat and eventually kill Mitch.

Classical martial arts or boxing films often represent the perseverance and victory of the protagonists' 'troubled masculinity' [Woodward 2014: 115]. *Enough*, however, depicts a troubled female lead who has no other choice than to revert to physical violence. The film stays true

to the genre's typical good versus evil storyline. While classical martial arts films would feature tropes of resilient masculinity, *Enough* shows a woman who emancipates herself through violence, in spite of her physical weakness. While the film did not receive much praise from its critics, the action scenes and the subsequent highlighting of krav maga in interviews with Lopez exposed the Israeli self-defense system to a wide range of audiences.⁴ *Enough* promotes its image as a simple and effective self-defense system that Slim masters within a short time. The message is clear: Even a weaker opponent can neutralize the threat of a much stronger aggressor.

From where does such power come? How do some representatives and spokespersons legitimize Krav Maga's dominance in the absence of any verification process (such as competitions)? A comment by Bas Rutten, a famous three-time Mixed Martial Arts heavyweight champion who also trained Krav Maga, may help to shed some light on this question:

As for self-defense, I think that krav maga is pretty much the best system out there. Why? They teach it to soldiers in Israel. In Israel, they got to have the best army in the world. They are under attack 24/7.
[*'Bas Bites: Krav Maga'* 2015]

Rutten establishes a direct link between Israel's defensive military victories ('they got to have the best army in the world') and krav maga as a self-defense technique. In such promotions, its effectiveness is directly linked to the IDF's military history. As we have seen above, krav maga has its historical roots in the Hagana and the later established Israeli Defense Force (IDF). According to Avi Moyal, the IKMF still has close contact with some Israeli special forces and adapts its curriculum according to their input. There is, therefore, an undeniable link between krav maga and the IDF. Yet to directly derive its efficiency from the IDF's military victories is problematic, however. Most of Israel's wars were not won through the army's superior hand-to-hand combat skills. I argue that such and similar representations build on nationalist narratives of Israel's small yet highly effective defensive force. In these discourses, Israel is outnumbered compared to its Arab neighbors and with its back to the sea. This gives the small country no other chance but to defend itself than through smart (preemptive) attacks.

Images of an Israel under attack protected by the victorious IDF and its heroic soldiers are widespread in Israel's popular culture. Ella Shohat

4 See for example here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8o-heFnT1gY&ab_channel=KravMagaNY

describes this heroic nationalistic genre [Shohat 1989], which featured prominently in Israeli cinema after 1948 and later resurfaced after the 1967 war [Ben-David 2009]. This trope of a David vs. Goliath fight is prominently present in the memories of the 1967 war, which is most charged with messianic sentiments for nationalistic Israelis. An interview conducted with an Israeli veteran on this topic in 2020 can exemplify this:

[In 1967] the whole Arab community went behind Nasar, and all Arabs were happy since they thought that the Jewish state would be wiped out. But when they saw the miracles that took place [in the 1967 war], I can't tell you what were all the things that took place, but within six days, Israel had the upper hand in Syria, in Jordan, in Lebanon, in the Sinai, in Egypt and then the whole world opened their eyes you see. Israel being such a small country that on the world map, you only have a dot that Israel did all of this. Now slowly, they know the power of Israel. People open their eyes now, and they know they can't go against Israel.

However, the notion of Israel's wars as miraculous (and messianic) self-defense has been criticized by Israeli post-Zionist historians. In the 1990s, authors such as Simha Flapan [Flapan 1983], Avi Shlaim [Shlaim 1988], or Ilan Pappé [Pappé 2014] started to question a large body of hegemonic narratives regarding Israel's establishment and its subsequent wars. For example, they challenged the idea that the 1948 war was an Israeli David versus a pan-Arab Goliath situation. Pappé wrote that the Arab armies would not be able to 'endure for more than a brief period on the battlefield' [Pappé 2014: 117]. These post-Zionist scholars had a significant impact on Israel's military history's nationalist narratives and started to criticize the discourse of the 'right to self-defense'. Kuntsman and Stein, for example, write that such nationalist views ignore Palestinian civilian casualties in the conflict and support the increasing disappearance of discussions on Israel's occupation in the country's public spheres [Kuntsman and Stein 2015].

The metonymical link between the Israeli military and krav maga techniques is undoubtedly a unique selling point compared to other self-defense systems. To derive krav maga's effectiveness from the IDF's military victories, however, is problematic as hand-to-hand combat plays a minor role in Israel's wars. Krav maga techniques, however, contribute to the ongoing occupation of the West Bank, where soldiers utilize its techniques for controlling the Palestinian population. At this point, we encounter another ambivalence: On the one hand, krav maga's foundational myth is tightly linked to a time when Lichtenfeld fought against fascism and anti-Semitism in the streets of Bratislava. On the other hand, its association with the IDF connects krav maga

to the day-to-day practices of military oppression. Such links are mainly missing in the system's global promotion. It is not surprising, therefore, that some voices condemn krav maga as 'enabling war crimes' or as a practice which 'condon[es] the oppression of Palestine' and subsequently protest its uncritical consumption [Preoccupied Territory n.d.]. In continuation to what has been said before, I need to add that krav maga not only works as a nodal point capturing the elusive 'Israeliness' as an intrinsically martial Jewish project but also forges the heterogeneous and often conflicting Jewish-Israeli identities into a more unified body against an outside Palestinian/Arab threat.

SOLIDIFICATION OF KRAV MAGA

The following section demonstrates how some first-generation instructors reacted to krav maga's stellar ascent and attempted to take control of its various interpretations. The rapid increase of schools and studios worldwide (aside from Islamic countries), together with the fact that the name 'krav maga' is not trademarked, has caused a proliferation of meanings and practices (a few of which have been shown above), which according to some instructors, are spurious and even dangerous. David Khan, a black belt in the IKMA, describes this in one of his publications: 'people do not know what they do not know. Subpar krav maga may be viewed as competent krav maga because people do not know the difference' [Khan 2020: 4]. I will describe this struggle of reinstalling an 'authentic' tradition in the face of krav maga's demise of symbolic efficiency [Žižek 2000] as a dynamic of *solidification*.

I already used the theoretical-methodological lens of solidification in my 2018 book on ritual and salvific practices at a Hindu pilgrimage site in Baluchistan [Schaflechner 2018]. What seems like an odd choice at first glance emerges from what I consider to be a widespread ethnographic problem, namely: 'How is it possible to organize a field of voices in which everyone lays claim to speak "the truth"?' [Schaflechner 2018: 17]. 'Truth' in this regard aims to foreground elements that have (or strive to have) a constitutive and *grounding* role for the phenomenon under investigation. While my work in Baluchistan asked how religious authorities validate or repudiate certain rituals' potential to provide their performers with salvation (*moksha*), the krav maga authorities I interviewed (and studied with) would not claim anything of less importance: For many, the question of which krav maga one practices is simply a matter of life and death as the wrongly exercised moves would lead to injury and, in the worst case, to the loss of life. Within such contexts, 'solidification' is a metaphor for the strategies (narrative and embodied) to counter its demise in symbolic efficiency by representing one's particular understanding as the universal Truth. With regard

to krav maga such discourses foreground the specific relation to the founder Imi Lichtenfeld as a way to unlock the system's universal scientific potential. To understand this seeming contradiction, I first need to show some of the main criticisms hurled at krav maga.

Krav Maga as *Bullshido*

One reason for krav maga's international fame is its appearance in choreographed fighting scenes for Hollywood productions. Action films such as *Collateral* with Tom Cruise, *Blood Diamond* with Leonard DiCaprio, the recent James Bond films, or, as shown above, *Enough* with Jennifer Lopez prominently feature krav maga techniques [Joost 2020]. Like the Keysi Fighting Method [KFM], krav maga also received a popularity boost when it was picked up by Hollywood and its celebrities [Bowman 2014]. This has made krav maga increasingly visible globally and has also led to ridicule from within combat sports and martial arts circles [Khan 2020:1].⁵ There it is mocked as *bullshido*, a term implying inefficient and fake martial art.

Some schools' excessive flirtation with cinematic elements has significantly contributed to this mockery. Instructor Roy Elghanayan is an example of this. Elghanayan is also called 'the Bruce Lee of krav maga', a title he earned through his shows, which are often performed in front of large audiences. Besides having his own school with branches worldwide, Roy works as an actor, a stuntman, and a fight-choreographer. With its fast pace movements, acrobatics, and even costumes, Elghanayan's krav maga demonstrations closely resemble cinematic action scenes. Roy always features as the protagonist of these encounters and makes his attackers fly through the air with his stylized moves, such as flying armbars, tornado kicks, and the disarming of people carrying guns. Many videos are accompanied by heavy guitar riffs or electronic music for increased effect.⁶ Opinions starkly differ on Elghanayan's performances and his role in krav maga. While his

5 The discussion about fake or real martial arts is certainly not confined to krav maga. Especially online discussions are excessive and cannot be adequately portrayed here. An overview of criticisms against but also a defense of Krav Maga is provided in this thread: https://www.reddit.com/r/kravmaga/comments/k3w2zy/anybody_else_noticed_the_main_rmartialarts_sub/ [last accessed January 2021]

6 Elghanayan, however, also utilizes action film effects to add intensity to his teaching in class. For example, in one instructional video, Roy is shown teaching a group of students without an audience. When demonstrating new techniques in front of the class, Elghanayan stomps the ground. Simultaneously, punching, which, together with his forceful exhaling while executing a punch, provides audio intensity to his movements [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7fms3Jyvt2U] [last accessed January 2021]

students and followers praise Roy, his teaching and demonstrations have also been ridiculed. One senior krav maga instructor I met in Israel labeled him 'a clown' and added in one of our talks that he thinks that people like Roy make it hard for the krav maga community to be taken seriously. Internet platforms such as Reddit also discuss Elghanayan and his positive or dubious effect on krav maga's reputation. The YouTube comment sections for Roy's videos (in cases where they are turned on) also reveal this divide and feature, at times, scathing views of his work.

A further point of contention concerns krav maga's lack of competition outside the IDF [IDF 2014]. Players of combat sports with a traditionally strong competitive side – such as MMA, Muay Thai, or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu – argue that the absence of contests makes quality control impossible. Such criticism is accentuated through highly mediatized Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) contests such as the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) or Bellator. The UFC, for example, advertises their competitions with slogans such as 'as real as it gets', aiming to foreground their commitment to genuine violent altercations.⁷ Responding to this criticism, krav maga instructors argue that any competition follows specific rules (the UFC, for example, allows no groin strikes, no biting, and no 12 to 6 elbows) and are by definition 'unreal.' In contrast, in street fights, everything is permitted.

Other criticisms stem from the notion that anybody can learn krav maga techniques in a relatively short time (one version of this trope is exhibited in the film *Enough*). Such disapproval is further kindled by programs offering courses entirely online or providing instructor certificates after minimal training. For example, one online course promotes itself as teaching customers how to become a 'Real Tough Warrior' within only 7 hours of watching their video on demand.⁸ One German krav maga school offers instructor certificates to people based on a one-week intensive training without requiring any prior martial arts knowledge.⁹ Such promotions kindle the condemnation of the whole field, as critics would claim that the necessary muscle memory could simply not be achieved to instantaneously react in violent altercations without years of conditioning.

7 On the 'reality' of such highly mediatized events, see Downey [2014]

8 <https://www.udemy.com/course/the-complete-course-for-krav-maga/>

9 They, however, 'recommend' some former martial experience <https://kravmaga-ausbildung.de/krav-maga-instructor-90> [last accessed January 2021]

**'Authentic' Krav Maga:
Particular Relationships and Universal Principles**¹⁰

The dynamics of solidification are continuous and ongoing. However, they are most apparent when a tradition's grounding elements have been put into question [Schaflechner 2020]. Krav Maga's globalization brought a variety of deterritorializing dynamics [Deleuze and Guattari 2013], which not only made it known outside Israel and the IDF, but, according to many instructors, also caused misunderstandings and misrepresentation. How does the krav maga community react in the light of such controversy? In other words, how do some of them solidify their style of teaching in the face of its global demise of symbolic efficiency? In the following, I will show how the solidification of krav maga navigates between people's connection with its founder, Imi Lichtenfeld, and the development of the system's alleged 'universal principles' [Draheim 2017].

**Continuation of a Lineage:
Israeli Krav Maga Association (Gidon System)**

'I am concerned for the future of krav maga' [Khan 2020]. This is how David Khan, the head of the Israeli Krav Maga Association in the US, starts the first chapter of his latest book. Khan has been studying and teaching krav maga for many decades and received his black belt from Haim Gidon, one of Lichtenfeld's senior students. Khan has authored various books on krav maga and has taught military and police units in the United States. His latest publication directly addresses what he sees as its current problem.

Imi Lichtenfeld created too formidable a fighting method for it to be relegated to a pile of self-defense and exercise fads [...] With krav maga's rapid commercialization and the spread of McDojos [fake krav maga schools] offering krav maga, the US military and law enforcement communities now understandably view krav maga somewhat skeptically. Krav maga is also increasingly disparaged in varying degrees by professional mixed martial arts (MMA) fighters [...] The tragedy is that some lives may be lost, along with people sustaining serious injuries because many current charlatan krav maga instructors do not understand what tactics work in real situations.
[Khan 2020: 1]

10 I am conscious that this subheading features mainly 'expert' voices and I hope to come back to provide some of the intriguing views of krav maga students in a future publication.

What is Khan's answer to this predicament? For him, the only way to teach authentic krav maga is through a teacher-student lineage reaching back to Imi Lichtenfeld. Khan writes that Haim Gidon, his teacher, is the 'highest-ranking krav maga instructor in the world' [Khan 2020: 2] and thus the foremost authority to 'evolve and improve' the self-defense system [Khan 2020: xxvi]. This is echoed on the IKMA's homepage, where it is stated that Lichtenfeld made Gidon into the 'top authority' to graduate students to black belts and higher dans [Israeli Krav Maga Association n.d.].

For him, the responsibility to keep the tradition authentic while adapting it to new threats lies with those studying under Gidon. The authenticity of the techniques presented in Khan's latest book is thus the direct result of Lichtenfeld's trust in Gidon. Khan also grants other high-ranking instructors who had been certified under Lichtenfeld this legitimacy [Khan 2020: 3]. However, proper krav maga can only be taught based on the IKMA Gidon System's curriculum.

Trademark and Institutionalization: Krav Magen Israeli (KAMI)

Krav Magen Israeli (KAMI) follows a similar, yet slightly different, path to authenticate its teachings. KAMI was established in 1989 when Eli Avikzar (1947-2004), Lichtenfeld's first student, opened his branch of krav maga and called it Krav Magen Israeli. Avikzar was Lichtenfeld's first black belt and taught self-defense for many years in the IDF. In a 2020 interview, Avi Abeceedon, the current head of KAMI, says that while discussions about the curriculum were one reason for the split, another was about the name. Avikzar changed 'maga' ('contact') to 'magen' ('shield') in an attempt to distinguish his school from others and trademark the name. Unlike krav maga, which can be used by anyone, Abeceedon says, people who want to teach KAMI need to undergo rigorous training. This includes courses at the Wingate Institute, a school for sports and physical education in Netanya, where future KAMI instructors learn about physiology, didactics, fitness, etc.¹¹ Today KAMI has branches in six different countries but is mainly active in Israel. According to one KAMI black belt, not pushing onto the international market was intentional to ensure quality control.

Like many other krav maga schools, KAMI promotes its self-defense

11 Wingate is home to some Israeli national teams, and its webpage states that 5000 students, scholars, and athletes come to the institute every day http://www.jewishsports.net/wingate_institute.htm [last accessed January 2021]

as being based on 'natural reactions'.¹² However, these natural reactions can only be trained in their unique facilities where they are continuously adapted to new threats. This is also the reason why, according to Abeceedon, other krav maga branches lag 30 years behind KAMI's curriculum. After Eli Avikzar's death, who used to be the main driving force behind KAMI's strive for improvement, it is now Abeceedon himself, responsible for overseeing KAMI's constant development.

This trope of the continuous evolution of one's school (in opposition to others) is quite familiar and has come up in almost all engagements with instructors and students. Like the IKMA, the tension between authenticity and the system's continuous evolution is eliminated through a link to Lichtenfeld. Avikzar's unique status as Lichtenfeld's first black belt grants Eli the ability to change the design without tainting its authenticity. KAMI's claim to teaching universal and 'natural reactions' is embodied through the particular link with its founder and KAMI's trademarked name as well as its link to the Wingate Institute.

Understanding Lichtenfeld's Systematicity: Krav Maga Global (KMG)

Krav Maga Global promotes its teaching style as 'authentic' through Eyal Yanilov's (KMG's founder) close relation to Imi Lichtenfeld. This connection is emphasized on the KMG's homepage, where it reads:

KMG's krav maga system is continuing to be developed by Imi's closest assistant, Master Eyal Yanilov, adapting it to meet the changing needs of civilians of all ages, military units, law enforcement officers, and security personnel. It is an evolving system, which provides novel solutions for dynamic situations. [Krav Maga Global n.d.]

According to Yanilov, however, it is not only the close relationship to Lichtenfeld that provides him with authority to develop [the system] krav maga. In some of our talks during the year 2020, Yanilov said that he became quite close with Lichtenfeld after their joint trip to the US at the beginning of the 1980s. However, the major shift in their relationship occurred when Eyal started studying engineering in Haifa and Tel Aviv. Based on his biomechanics training and exchange with Lichtenfeld, Yanilov developed a systemic approach to krav maga, which led to the installment of a new curriculum in 1987. From then

onwards, the program featured more technical training methods and introduced new belt levels. This change was solidified through practice and writing, which resulted in the first book on krav maga in 1992.

Yanilov not only closes the gap between development and authenticity through the title of being Imi's closest assistant. According to Eyal, Lichtenfeld kept continuously changing krav maga so that 'Imi was not teaching a system [but] he was the system'.¹³ In other words, the founder was not providing Yanilov with any special insight into krav maga's ontic core, but rather with an understating of his system of changing krav maga. Yanilov's contribution to curriculum development in the 1980s based on his engineering studies also supports his position. While during Imi's lifetime, changes were always run by krav maga's founder, after Lichtenfeld's death, Yanilov says, he added new practices to the curriculum based on Lichtenfeld's principles. Yanilov's understanding and coproduction of krav maga's structure guarantee that KMG is both authentically Lichtenfeld and adapting to new threats.

To sum up: In their attempts to solidify their tradition as an (or the only) authentic one, the first generation of krav maga instructors needed to tackle the tension between an individual instructor's relationship with Lichtenfeld and the system's alleged universal principles. For the IKMA and David Khan, it is Haim Gidon who, as 'the highest-ranking krav maga instructor in the world', has the power to 'steward krav maga's future progress' [Khan 2020: xxvi]. For Avi Abeceedon, Eli Avikzar, who, as Imi's first student, can adopt KAMI to new challenges. After Avikzar's death, Abeceedon inherited this responsibility and solidified it through its institutionalization at Wingate. Finally, for the KMG, Yanilov can properly further krav maga's development and adoption of new threats. This unique position stems from Yanilov's understanding of Lichtenfeld's way of changing the system and from his history of codesigning the krav maga curriculum during Imi's lifetime.

12 'Israeli combat system, based on natural reactions of the human body and excels in its [sic] simplicity and effectiveness' <https://www.kami.org.il/language/en/> [last accessed January 2021]

13 From a 2020 interview.

CONCLUSION

Krav maga's globalization, starting only thirty years ago, has been possible through Imi Lichtenfeld's senior students' efforts and through media representations. Some of these promotions advertise krav maga with stereotypes about Israel and its involuntary martial people. There, 'Israeliness' is captured with discourses of muscular Judaism and Tzabra Jewish identity. Other promotions highlight its close link to the IDF and tap into nationalist narratives describing an outnumbered yet determined Israeli military that defeated a much larger Arab opponent. These promotions claim an intrinsic metonymical link between Israeli military victories and krav maga's efficiency. However, such associations ignore how the IDF uses an alleged self-defense system in the Palestinian people's occupation and oppression. The system's stellar global ascent also led to a decline in its symbolic efficiency, causing various discussions about 'authentic' practice. Already split into different factions and often competing for student numbers, talks about 'real' krav maga and who owns it started to become more visible. Instigated by an increasing amount of mockery from the side of combat sports practitioners, krav maga schools and instructors of the first generation started to safeguard what they considered the authentic core of the practice. These dynamics of solidification oscillate between krav maga's universal principles and the interpretation of such through the personal link with the founder Imi Lichtenfeld.

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