

No place for genocide: Qatar football fans stand for Gaza against Israel

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Doha, December 18 (RHC)-- While football players and fans around the world are being reprimanded for displays of solidarity with Palestine, thousands gathered at the Education City Stadium in Qatar to show their support and help raise money for Palestinians facing the wrath of Israel's war on Gaza.

As the sun set on a windy Friday evening at the former Qatar World Cup 2022 venue on the outskirts of the capital, Doha, fans dressed in Palestinian colours and waving the Palestinian flag flocked to the venue in high spirits.

The Stand with Palestine charity match was arranged by the Qatar Foundation. It was based on an initiative by a group of students hoping to raise money through ticket sales and create awareness about the situation in Gaza, where nearly 19,000 people, including more than 7,000 children, have been killed in the Israeli bombardment since October 7th.

Karim Abbas, one of the Palestinian students involved in organising the event, said the match was being played “for the children of Palestine.” “As a Palestinian myself, it’s very hard to see those videos [from Gaza] but then I imagine the people living through the oppression and I realise it’s much more difficult to endure,” a visibly emotional Abbas told Al Jazeera.

The participating teams comprised students from two Qatar-based schools and international footballers, including former Spanish World Cup winner Javi Martinez, Morocco international Soufiane Boufal and several Qatar national team players. One team represented Qatar, the other Palestine.

Despite the presence of global and regional stars, fans inside the 40,000-capacity stadium remained focused on their main job for the night – waving the Palestinian flag and raising their voices for the people of Gaza. “We are here to tell the people of Gaza that we have not forgotten them,” Abdellah Abdul Razzaq, a Qatar-based Canadian, said ahead of the match. “In 2023, there’s no place for genocide.”

In the build-up to the match, star footballers walked on to the pitch and interacted with fans by giving autographs and posing for photos. As the players went back to their dressing rooms and the fans waited for the match to get under way, a familiar tune blared from the PA system and the crowd instantly jumped to its feet.

The popular Palestinian song “Dammi Falasteeni” (My Blood is Palestinian) rang around the compact stadium and fans of all ages, economic backgrounds and nationalities sang and danced along.

For the Palestinians present in the stands, the crowd’s loud rendition of the song’s chorus brought a gush of emotions. “To see all these people, whether they are Palestinian or not, supporting the cause of Palestine makes me very happy,” Abdel Wahab al-Masri, a Palestinian based in Doha, told Al Jazeera. “If people in Gaza were able to see this support, it would give them strength and greater power to resist the occupation,” he added.

Al-Masri and his five compatriots held up a large Palestinian flag as he explained how the people of his country find the courage to resist Israel’s occupation of their land. “The courage and resistance you see is something all Palestinians grow up with,” he said, referring to social videos of Palestinian children vowing to remain steadfast in the face of adversity.

“The mental toughness to understand that it [Gaza] is their land and, once the war ends, they will have to reclaim it is part of their upbringing,” al-Masri said, as the song kept playing on loop.

Emotions were running high for everyone in the crowd, and not just the Palestinians. For Chique Leo, from the Philippines, it was a matter of showing the “disgusting” world leaders that Palestinians are not alone.

“It breaks my heart to see civilians dying in their hundreds every day – parents losing their daughters and sons, children losing their parents but they [world leaders] don’t care because they are busy enjoying their comfortable lifestyles,” the 55-year-old said as her voice trembled with anger. “This is an unprecedented war and the way the world is letting this continue and dehumanising Palestinians is unbearable.”

As kickoff approached, the number of people in the stands grew and so did the fundraising figures. According to the organisers, 20 million Qatari riyals (\$5.5m) had been raised by the end of the match.

Light-hearted, on-field action was no match for the charged crowd, which kept “Palestine!” in their chants throughout the match.

Drum beats were followed by roars of “Falasteen”, Mexican waves turned into Palestinian waves as thousands of flags were raised in unison.

The match ended in a 4-3 (penalty shoot-out) win for Palestine, but it was hard to tell which team represented the home crowd, as players from both sides came together to wave the red, white, black and green flag one more time.

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