

A tragic tale of Palestine's short-stature footballers amid Israel's genocidal war



Palestinian short-stature footballer Salah Shabaan, a member of the country's national team, has been murdered alongside his wife and daughter in an Israeli attack.

By Alireza Akbari

In a tragedy that echoes the suffering of countless families in Gaza, Salah Shabaan, a talented member of the Palestinian national football team for short-statured athletes, was killed alongside his wife, daughter, and other family members in an Israeli bombing in central Gaza.

The gruesome attack added to the staggering toll of over 350 Palestinian football athletes who have lost their lives amid the Israeli-American genocidal war that completed one year recently.

Shabaan was not just an athlete. He was a beacon of hope and resilience, representing Palestine on the international stage in a sport tailored for individuals with dwarfism.

However, his death represents another major loss, not only for his bereaved family but for the Palestinian nation that loves its athletes who represent the country at the highest level.

In March 2023, more than a year before the genocidal war was launched, the Palestine Amputee Football Association announced the formation of a team for players experiencing skeletal dysplasia—what is commonly referred to as dwarfism—in the coastal Palestinian territory.

The team became a powerful symbol of hope and resilience for short-stature individuals across the region. Through their unwavering commitment to sports, they advocated for change, inspiring future generations to chase their dreams, regardless of their physical stature.

The team is under the banner of the Palestine Football Association for Amputees and represents the Palestine National Football Team for Athletes of Short Stature.

These prayers quickly gained regional and international recognition for their indefatigable efforts to promote inclusion and showcase the talent of short-stature athletes.

Last year, the association announced that the team would compete in an Arabian competition scheduled to take place in Morocco in May 2024. The tournament was not just a sporting event; it was a fervent declaration of existence and talent from a community that often found itself overlooked.

Overcoming adversity

In mid-March 2023, just two months before the highly anticipated first match in Morocco, Fouad Abu Ghalioun, Head of the Palestine Amputee Football Association, made a resolute statement.

"Even though the team has faced financial and technical difficulties, we decided to compete in the upcoming match in Morocco," he was quoted as saying at the time.

His remarks encapsulated the determination of a team that refused to be defined by their obstacles.

Haitham Al-Sakka, a member of the team, also echoed the sentiment of pride and resilience.

"We are so happy to represent our Palestinian State in the international and Arab competitions," he said, as he and his teammates looked forward to the competition.

For athletes like Haitham, this opportunity wasn't just about football, it was about symbolizing hope and unity for a nation that has long endured hardships.

"Players from Gaza in general, and those with dwarfism in particular, have challenged many obstacles to qualify for matches outside of Gaza because of the Israeli blockade," he remarked, shedding light on limitations imposed on them by the Israeli occupation regime.

"Israel bans us from going to the West Bank to join professional training with our colleagues there and attending any meetings with our National Football Association to know more about our future."

The-34-year-old Al-Sakka stood as a pillar of strength within the humanitarian realm, serving as a Community Programme Officer for Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP) in Gaza.

Reflecting on his experiences of living under occupation, Al-Sakka penned poignant reflections in his first blog.

"From the moment I kicked a ball in my garden in Khan Yunis, in southern Gaza, I knew that football was my passion. But little did I know that my journey to the pitch would be filled with challenges and obstacles," he wrote.

"But it wasn't until I turned 34 that a remarkable opportunity presented itself. I joined the Palestine Sport Club in Gaza, which nominated me to play the Palestinian national football team, exclusively for individuals of short stature.

"Our team quickly became a tight-knit family," he continued, "We trained relentlessly, pushing ourselves beyond our limits, proving that our height did not determine our abilities. The team was expected to play its first match in Morocco last May. However, lack of funding and visa issues deprived us of the opportunity to represent Palestine."

In the second installment of his poignant two-part blog series published in July 2021, he shared his harrowing account of the Israeli military offensive and its devastating impact on Gaza in May 2021.

"Even though the latest attack on Gaza mirrored previous assaults, it was a profoundly new experience for me. I am now a father and a husband; my responsibilities extend far beyond my own life," he wrote,

"I must protect not only myself but also my wife and my three-year-old daughter, Laure, who is experiencing the horrors of war for the very first time."

Since October last year, the genocidal war has claimed nearly 43,000 lives in Gaza, including more than 350 athletes, many of them footballers. Two of them are short-stature footballers.

Many of them were prominent names who had represented Palestine at the international level.

The repeated delays to suspend Israel from the international sports have not gone down well with football fans, activists in Palestine and across the world, who see international sports governing bodies complicit in the ongoing genocide.

Earlier this month, a Palestinian request to ban Israel from international football was again postponed by the world football's governing body FIFA even as the death toll from the war continues to mount.

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