

Israel's war on Gaza hits Palestinian football

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Ramallah, October 30 (RHC)-- Covering football can lead many journalists to resort to hyperbole. When Middlesbrough overcame a three-goal deficit to beat FC Basel in the quarterfinals of the 2006 UEFA Cup, the late commentator Alastair Brownlee screamed that it was "the greatest comeback since Lazarus!"

Two years later, 80 km (50 miles) west of Bethany, where Lazarus rose from the dead, a Palestinian footballer actually repeated the Biblical feat.

In December 2008, amid deadly Israeli air raids on the Gaza Strip, Hazem Alrekhawi, then 19 and a promising player with Shabab Rafah, got on a bus with nine of his classmates from the technical college he was attending in Gaza City.

A missile fired from an Israeli F-16 fighter jet struck the bus, apparently killing everyone on board. The bodies were taken to al-Shifa Hospital. Alrekhawi, whose body was covered in shrapnel, was wrapped up and put into the morgue's refrigerator.

Five hours later, his mother arrived at the hospital, looking to identify the corpse of her son. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed a hand moving. Alrekhawi was alive. Alrekhawi escaped with his life but it looked unlikely the defender would be able to continue his football career due to the severity of his injuries.

The Rafah native defied the odds though, and in 2011, he made a move to the occupied West Bank – where players are better compensated – playing for eight different clubs over 10 years.

This summer, he decided to return to his hometown club Shabab Rafah, in part to join his brother Mohammed, 38, who was set to retire at the end of the 2023-24 season.

On October 11, amid intense Israeli bombardment on Gaza following attacks by Hamas in Israel, Mohammed had a brush with death. Photographs showed the striker being pulled from the rubble of his home, emerging bloodied and wearing a pair of Shabab Rafah shorts.

Israel's attacks on Gaza have only intensified since. While there has been no further news of the brothers' safety, they have not appeared on the lists of the dead released by the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

Much like the Alrekhawi brothers, Palestinian football has been thought dead only to return.

The Palestinian Football Association (PFA) was founded in 1928 and it joined FIFA the following year. But over time it became an exclusively Jewish organisation and changed its name to the Israel Football Association in 1948, after the founding of the state of Israel.

While Palestine national teams played in the subsequent decades, it was not until 1998 when the PFA was reborn and Palestine became a full FIFA member – a half-decade after the Nakba ("catastrophe" in Arabic), in which thousands of Palestinians were killed and more than 750,000 uprooted to create the state of Israel.

Palestinian football survived the upheaval of the second Intifada from 2000 to 2005, deepening occupation, and five Israeli wars on Gaza, with the national team successfully qualifying for three straight Asian Cup competitions.

But with no end in sight to the latest war in Gaza, gearing up for the start of the 2026 World Cup qualification in November and the Asian Cup in January 2024 might prove the toughest challenge yet.

Mohammed Balah, 30, left Gaza for Jordan six years ago to forge a professional career. His exploits earned him a national team debut shortly thereafter and a career across five clubs in the Jordanian, Omani, and Egyptian top-flights.

Like Alrekhawi, Balah decided to return to Gaza this summer in search of consistent playing time following an anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury while playing for Al-Masry in the Egyptian Premier League. He had hoped to parlay that into a return to the national team. That is unlikely to happen now.

Balah had survived previous attacks on Gaza; in May 2021, his home was demolished by an Israeli air raid. But in one of his last messages on social media, dated October 10, he was less optimistic about surviving the latest round of violence.

“Maybe [in] a few hours, we will be cut off from the world, due to a power outage and the batteries will lose the charge. The Israelis bombed the telecommunications and internet company, they bombed the electricity company and the power generators in the streets,” he wrote.

“The rest of the generators don’t have any stock of diesel. We will die in silence, away from the eyes of the world and friends.”

When Balah first made his way out of Gaza, he did so with his friend and teammate Mahmoud Wadi. The pair signed for Al-Ahli Amman before parting ways.

Wadi, now 28, went to Egypt and became the most expensive transfer in Palestinian football when he transferred to Pyramids FC in 2021 for a fee of 17 million Egyptian pounds (\$1.1 m at the time). In a tearful interview on October 22 with Cairo-based OnTime Sports channel, Wadi recounted the feeling of living through the 2014 war on Gaza.

“I would go to bed at night and stare at the ceiling expecting it to come crashing down on my head at any moment,” he said.

The striker has only intermittent contact with his family and his friends since the start of this even more devastating war and although no current national or Olympic team player has yet died in this round of bombing, there have been several deaths in Gaza’s football family.

“Many players that I played against or with while in Gaza have died,” Wadi said.

Khalil Jadallah, a Palestinian football commentator and analyst, put together a starting XI of Palestinian players who have died due to Israeli violence. “It is difficult to know exactly how many have died during this war because of the sheer amount of death,” Jadallah told Al Jazeera.

Among the confirmed dead are athletes and administrators from a wide range of sports, including basketball player for Al-Breij, Bassim al-Nabahin, 27; footballer Rashid Dabbour (28), who played for Al-Ahli Beit Hanoon; and Ahmad Awad (21), who represented Palestine’s national football team for dwarfism.

The Palestinian sporting community in the occupied West Bank has also been affected as tensions have spiked there. Nineteen-year-old Markaz Balata midfielder Mohammed Maree Sawafta was killed by Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces during a protest in his hometown of Tubas, near Nablus, on October 27.

All types of sporting events have come to a grinding halt across Gaza, the occupied West Bank, and Israel. So it has been three weeks since any Palestinian footballer kicked a ball in a competitive match.

With football on an indefinite hiatus, Palestine national team players tried to leave for other countries. The deteriorating security situation in the occupied West Bank meant many of them were unable to travel between cities due to violence by Israeli settlers on the roads.

“Our team doctor tried to travel from his village to Ramallah but had to turn back because settlers attacked his car. They threw a big boulder at him, which smashed his windshield,” a current national team player, who wished to remain anonymous, told Al Jazeera. “He was lucky to escape alive.”

With the land crossing with Jordan closed for hours on end, Palestine were forced to withdraw from a tournament in Malaysia held from October 13 to 17.

All of the national team did eventually make it out of the country on Monday but were able to do so only after security was provided by the PA. Coordination with Jordan’s Prince Ali bin Al Hussein, who is also the president of the Jordan Football Association, was required to open the border and ensure the team’s safe passage.

A squad of 20 players under Tunisian manager Makram Daboub will prepare for a crucial set of 2026 World Cup qualifiers against Lebanon (November 16) and Australia (November 21).

Things had been trending in the right direction for Palestine, who have a 100 percent record in competitive matches under Daboub.

There was also hope that an expanded World Cup with eight spots reserved for Asian teams in 2026 could lead to Palestine's first-ever appearance at football's showpiece event.

But if Palestine are to plot a path to the next World Cup, they will have to do so without the benefit of playing at home. Palestine, who have never lost a World Cup qualifier on home soil, will instead have to host Australia on neutral ground in Kuwait.

The national team has come to rely less on Gaza-based players in recent years, with the territory's best talent flocking to the occupied West Bank and Egyptian leagues in search of better pay and playing conditions. A Gaza-based player has not been called up to the national team since goalkeeper Abdullah Shaqfa was called up for the Arab Cup in December 2021.

But the national team and wider Palestinian football "will definitely be affected by Israel's war on Gaza", Jadallah said.

"Players have been killed who might have gone on to play for the national team. The Yarmouk Stadium in Gaza has also been destroyed," he said.

"The lack of a home-field advantage will have a huge effect on the squad against a strong team like Australia. [Palestine] will also need to find a way to overcome the mental struggles they have been dealing with during the war."

Palestine's football team has been counted out and left for dead before, but perhaps this squad has more Lazarus-like comebacks in them.

For Mahmoud Wadi, football provided a lifeline. "If not for football I might not be in the position I am today," Wadi said. "Football helped me get out of Gaza and it's our responsibility to try and represent Palestine the best we can."

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