

Palestine footballer Mohammed Barakat killed in Israeli attack on Gaza

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Khan Younis, March 11 (RHC)-- Palestinian footballer Mohammed Barakat has been killed after Israeli forces bombed his house in Khan Younis amid the ongoing war in Gaza. The Barakat family's home was hit by Israeli bombs early on Monday, the first day of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan.

Barakat, Gaza's first centurion of goals and one of its top scorers, represented the national team and the Ahly Gaza football club in the local league.

The 39-year-old scored 114 goals and was known as "the legend of Khan Younis" during his long association with the Khan Younis Youth Club, which he captained. Barakat also played for several clubs in the occupied West Bank and Jordan, including Al-Wehdat.

The forward's death was termed a "huge loss for Palestinian football" by Khalid Abu-Habel, a local club footballer. "I played against him," Abu-Habel, a defender for Khadamat al-Maghazi, told Al Jazeera hours after the legendary striker's death was confirmed. "He was quick and clever. A top, top goal-scorer. Off the pitch, he was kind and friendly. A beloved friend of all."

Abu-Habel, who is also a doctor and works at the al-Shifa Hospital in Gaza, said Gaza's football community has "lost a lot" during the continuing war. "How many should we lose more? The sports community in Gaza is simply collapsing."

In the first month of the war that began on October 7, 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 five months ago. "I am too angry. He is a football icon. Sport in Gaza has lost a lot during the war."

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.

Perhaps the biggest loss has been that of Hani Al-Masdar, one of Palestine's greatest-ever footballers and a manager of the Olympic team, who was killed in January. Al-Masdar was hit by shrapnel from a missile that landed near his home in the central part of the Gaza Strip.

When the Palestinian national team participated in the AFC Asian Cup 2023 in Qatar in January and February, the players cut a visibly emotional figure when they recorded a historic win over Hong Kong in the group stage and qualified for the second round.

In an interview with Al Jazeera during the tournament, Palestine forward Mahmoud Wadi opened up about the struggles of putting on his best performance on the field while the war rages at home.

Wadi explained how players, especially those from Gaza, spend their days and nights anxiously waiting for news from home. "One morning, my brother disappeared. No one in my family knew anything due to a communication blackout. I felt very anxious during those 10 hours until I heard from him.

"This is our situation: A constant feeling of anxiety and unimaginable conditions. It's indescribable not knowing where your loved ones are, feeling helpless and unable to do anything. All you can do is pray. Every second of our lives is a test."



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