

Young Gazan sports journalist: On life amid war, love for football and why he refuses to leave

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By Syed Zafar Mehdi

"I apologize for the delay, but our circumstances are truly a matter of life or death," said Abubaker Abed, a young Palestinian sports journalist and commentator from Deir al-Balah, over the phone.

"As you can probably hear, planes are hovering closely over us right now. We are terrified and horrified by everything that is happening here," he hastened to add.

Since October 7, 2023, more than 40,600 Palestinians have been killed in the Israeli genocidal war against Palestinians in Gaza. Among the victims are many of Abed's family, neighbors, and friends.

A passionate football enthusiast, Abed has been fearlessly reporting on the Israeli war crimes in the besieged Palestinian territory, including how the war has devastated the local sports community.

"The number of Palestinian athletes killed in the ongoing genocide, which marked 330 days on Saturday, exceeds 350, including 254 footballers," the teenage journalist told the Press TV website.

Many of them were renowned athletes, having represented Palestine in international competitions. One of them was Mohammed Barakat, a legendary footballer from Gaza with 114 goals to his name.

Barakat was killed on the first day of the holy month of Ramadan while preparing for the pre-dawn meal. An airstrike targeted his family home in Khan Yunis city in the southern Gaza Strip.

During his professional career, spanning more than nine years, Barakat scored 114 goals, many for the Palestinian national football team and many for the clubs he represented – Ahli Gaza Football Club, the Jordanian club Al-Wehdah, and the Saudi Arabian club Al-Shoala.

"He was an incredible player, beloved and kind-hearted," Abed told the Press TV website, reminiscing about Barakat, who inspired the younger generation of football enthusiasts in the coastal territory.

Another prominent footballer killed by the Israeli regime is Mahmoud Osama al-Jazzar, the goalkeeper of Khadamah Rafah football club, winners of the Gaza Premier League last season.

"He was an outstanding goalkeeper with many clean sheets, known for his sharp reactions and impressive stops," Abed referred to Jazzar, who was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Rafah in May 2024.

Stadiums and other sports facilities have also been reduced to rubble in the Gaza Strip amid the war. The only stadium still standing is Al-Dura Stadium in Deir al-Balah, central Gaza Strip, which has become a sanctuary for thousands of displaced Palestinians in recent months.

"It's heartbreaking to see our stadiums, once filled with passion, rivalry, and joy, now reduced to rubble. It's unimaginable and heartbreaking that FIFA, the international community, and other organizations haven't spoken up about what's happening in Gaza," Abed said.

"Al-Mosadar Football Club, a third-tier football club in Gaza, competed for many years, nurturing local talent. It's a great loss that the club, which also served as a park for children, has been damaged. The situation facing other clubs and sports facilities is catastrophic, with nearly all of them obliterated."

He recently tweeted a photo of the club, now under Israeli control, urging all sporting organizations, FIFA, and football journalists "to intervene to protect the club."

FIFA, the world's governing football body, has been slammed for repeatedly delaying a decision on the Palestinian request to suspend Israel from international football over the war crimes in Gaza.

In a statement on Friday, FIFA said it had received the "independent legal assessment" of the Palestine Football Association's proposals against the Israel Football Association.

"This assessment will be sent to the FIFA Council for review, so the subject can be discussed at its next meeting, which will take place in October," the statement noted, delaying the decision once again.

Abed called it "the most disgraceful and hypocritical stance I have ever seen in my life." "FIFA, in other words, is saying: 'We would like to thank Israel for killing 40,000 people, maiming 90,000 others, and destroying sports in Gaza.'"

Abed had been an ardent fan of Chelsea Football Club, but that changed on October 13 when the Fulham-based Premier League club openly expressed support for the Israeli regime.

"Chelsea was everything to me -- my room was blue, my bed had a Chelsea logo, and my walls were covered with Chelsea posters. I dedicated my life to Chelsea," he told the Press TV website.

Abed, who speaks English fluently, learned the language by watching Chelsea matches and following club players Frank Lampard and John Terry, as well as managers Jose Mourinho and Roberto Di Matteo.

"I watched every post-match interview, every pre-match conference, everything. It was crucial for me to understand what these players and managers were saying, and that's why I was determined to learn English. This love for the club is what made English my second language," the young journalist noted.

Abed said he was aware that Roman Abramovich, the former owner who sold the club in May 2022, had always supported the Israeli regime but refrained from declaring it openly during his time at Chelsea.

"However, on October 13, Chelsea released a very distressing and disgraceful statement showing full support for Israel, without even mentioning the Palestinian cause," he said.

"By that time, at least 500 people had been killed and hundreds more injured. It deeply hurt me that the club I had dedicated everything to would make such a statement."

In the statement published on social media, Chelsea FC said it was "enormously saddened by the huge loss of life" following the Operation Al-Aqsa Storm on October 7, 2023, and added that the club "stands with the Jewish community in London and around the world in the face of the rising tide of antisemitism, which we have long campaigned against."

The club did not mention Palestinians massacred by the Israeli regime before or after October 7th. Abed parted ways with Chelsea but his passion for football has driven him to pursue a career as a football journalist and commentator, despite the challenges of living in war-torn Gaza.

Abubaker Abed with his friend Alhassan W. M. Mattar, an English literature student, who was killed by the Israeli military in Deir al-Balah on Dec. 11, 2023. (Photo by Abubaker Abed/X)

"We are deprived of many things, including education and employment opportunities. But despite these circumstances, my passion for football drives me to pursue a career as a football commentator and journalist," he said.

As a young English-speaking sports journalist and commentator, Abed said he has had "numerous opportunities" to leave Gaza, but he cannot bring himself to leave his family behind.

"They mean the world to me, and I am nothing without them. I wasn't brave enough to take that step because I can't leave my family," he remarked in a freewheeling conversation.

"As someone from Deir al-Balah, I insisted on covering the news from here because most journalists on the ground aren't as familiar with the area as I am. But even more importantly, I can't leave my homeland. I have to defend it with my words—that's the least I can do."

More than 40,600 Palestinians, most of them children and women, have been killed in the Israeli-American genocidal war that is now in its 12th month in the Gaza Strip.

The bombs supplied to the Israeli regime by the United States continue to claim innocent lives in Gaza every day even as the regime continues to procrastinate on the ceasefire deal.

[SOURCE: PRESS TV]

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