



# Football in Palestine: A Tool for Freedom

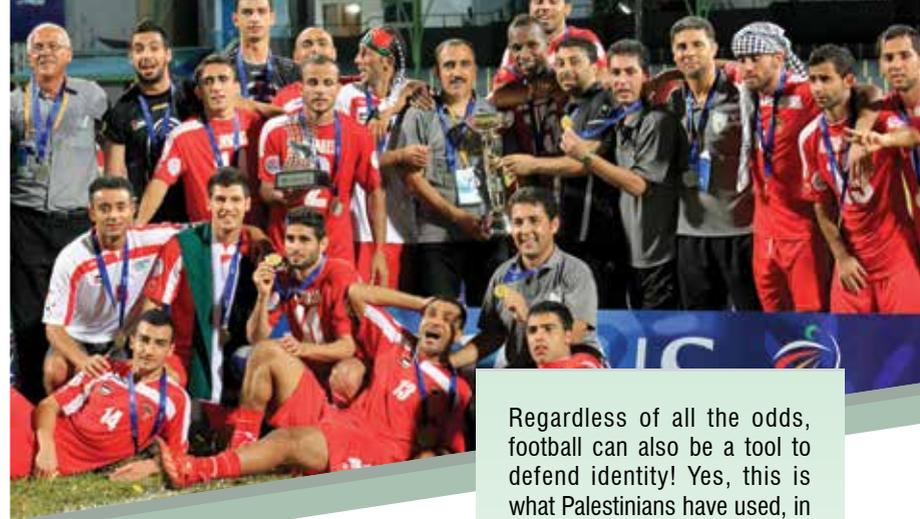
Courtesy of the Palestinian Football Association



The Palestinian Football Association was established in 1928 in the city of Jerusalem and joined FIFA and the AFC in 1998.

The beginnings of football in Palestine can be traced back to the early 1900s. The first football team was formed in 1908 in Al-Rawda School in Jerusalem. During the British Mandate, football as a sport thrived. However, Palestine participated in the 1932 FIFA World Cup qualifications and lost two matches to Egypt. Palestine participated in the World Cup for the second time in 1938, and the Palestine National Football Team was the first team to compete not only as an Arabic team but also as a representative from Asia.

*Football, the number one sport in Palestine.*



*The Palestine National Football Team.*

In the 1930s and 1940s more football teams were formed in Palestine, including Al-Dajani Sports Club and the Orthodox Club in Jerusalem, the Islamic Sports Club in Jaffa, and the Islamic Sports Club in Haifa. Other clubs included the National Club in Akka, the Gaza Sport Club and the Orthodox Club in Gaza. The list of best football players then included prominent players such as Haidar Abdel Shafi, Jaber al-Zarqa, George Mardini, Michel al-Tawil, Abdel Rahman al-Habbab, Rashad al-Shawa, and George Rishmawi.

During that period, football in Palestine developed considerably through friendly games that were held in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Gaza, and other Palestinian cities. Local clubs also hosted football teams from neighboring Arab countries such as Syria, Jordan, and Egypt.

After the 1948 *Nakba*, and the dispossession and dispersion of the Palestinian people, football stars went in different directions and were scattered in refugee camps and the diaspora. But Palestinian football recovered and new football teams appeared in Palestine. In 1953 the Palestine National Football Team, consisting of players from Gaza and the diaspora, took part in the First Arab Football Tournament held in Alexandria. The team's best result was to reach the Golden Square in the

Regardless of all the odds, football can also be a tool to defend identity! Yes, this is what Palestinians have used, in addition to many other tools, to ensure their existence as part of the international community. Marking the success of their endeavors, the Palestine National Football Team won the 2014 Asia Cup, a remarkable achievement for sports under occupation striving to win a basic right: the right to move freely.



Fourth Pan Arab Games in Cairo in 1964. During the 1960s, the Gaza and West Bank football teams achieved noticeable progress and took part in football championships in Jordan.

The *Naksa* in 1967, when Israel occupied the remaining Palestinian land, was a defeat for football in Palestine. Sports activities in the West Bank and Gaza stopped until 1973. Football teams were revived and new teams were formed and sponsored by the Higher Council for Youth and Sports in Palestine, a PLO institution. In addition, the Sport Clubs Association was established in the West Bank and Gaza to promote and expedite sports activities in light of the difficult and complex conditions resulting from the Israeli military occupation.



The Palestine National Football Team, winners of the 2014 AFC challenge Cup.

## Achievements of Palestinian Football

With the advent of the PA in 1994, a new era was inaugurated for football in Palestine. The Palestinian Football Association was reformed and rejoined FIFA and the AFC. In 1998, official local football competitions became more regular and Palestinian teams started to compete in Arab and international championships. In the same year, the Palestine National Football Team participated in the Arab Cup Championship in Lebanon, and in the following year the team played in the Ninth Pan Arab Games held in Jordan and won the bronze medal. In 1999, the AFC chose the Palestine National Football Team as the best team in Asia, and in 2000, the team took part in the First West Asian Football Federation Championship held in Jordan.

In March 2001, the Palestinian national team was chosen as the best Asian team, and in 2002, Palestine rejoined the World Cup qualification games and achieved second place in the group with Qatar and participated in the West Asian Championship in Syria. In December 2002, the team took part in the Eighth Prince Faisal Bin Fahd Championship

held in Kuwait and achieved third place.

In the 1990s, the list of players in the Palestine National Football Team included names such as Fadi Lafi, Khaldoun Fahd, Mohammad Swerki, Ziyad al-Kurd, Abdellatif al-Bahdari, Ahmad Kashkash, Fahd al-Attal, and Khader Abu Hammad who represented the team in Jordan, Iraq, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia.

Early in 2008, local clubs called for electing a new association and indeed the first nationwide elections took place under FIFA supervision and a new leadership was elected, headed by Major General Jibril Rjoub who was reelected in 2012. Rjoub succeeded in asserting the presence of Palestinian sports in the local, regional, and international arenas despite the obstacles created by the Israeli occupying authorities. In 2008, the association was awarded the Best National Association prize by FIFA, and in 2014, the Palestine National Football team was named the best national team in Asia. The team ranked 85th among international teams and 12th among Arab and Asian teams. Now the association has laws and regulations that govern its operations, and it develops training programs in line

with international standards for referees and coaches.

Other achievements of the association include the establishment of Joseph Blatter Football Academy for talented children and the new headquarters for the association, the formation of national teams for females and males of all ages, and the involvement of women in sports activities at all levels. Three women are now members of the association board.

The Palestinian Football Association, in cooperation with FIFA, aims to set Palestinian sports free from obstacles created by the Israeli military occupation, particularly lifting restrictions on movement and access imposed on Palestinian athletes. Moreover, the association aims to reach out to

Palestinian athletes in refugee camps and the diaspora. The association also seeks to draw up plans and strategies to develop sports in Palestine, organize local championships, and expand the Joseph Blatter Academy activities to have branches in various Palestinian cities.

*The Palestinian Football Association is the governing body for football in the State of Palestine. It was first founded in 1928, then passed through difficult times, given the restrictions of the Israeli occupation rules and regulations. In 1998, when the Palestinian Authority was established, the football association managed to revive its activities.*

*Article photos courtesy of the Palestinian Football Association.*

## Our Readers Say ...

*When thousands crowd to watch a Palestinian football match either live or on TV, one realizes how much progress has been made by the culture of football in Palestine. Here is the Cup of Palestine.*

**Ahmad Al Ali, sports reporter**

*Even though we are a people under occupation, I believe that we are doing a great job. We have facilities and we have passion. We just need to believe that we can make progress. Take the National Football Team as an example.*

**Lana Qattan, project manager**

*When the World Cup comes around, everyone here religiously follows every game. And so I find it weird that, among so many football fans, there was relatively little fuss about the Palestinian National Team winning the AFC Challenge Cup last year. They're not quite Real Madrid yet, but come on, this is our team! We need more enthusiasm next time.*

**Hani Salah, Ramallah**

*I found out recently that in September and October, our football team has games against the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Al-Ram. And then against Malaysia and Timor-Leste in Hebron. I'm a bit surprised and really happy that we have a bunch of international games in Palestine, and I need to find tickets immediately!*

**Dara Sehwal, Birzeit**