

# The Destruction of Sports Infrastructure in Gaza

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## Abstract

Gaza has long been a center of sports activity in Palestine. This essay gives a brief history of sports in Gaza, including major sporting clubs, and Palestinian sporting connections with international bodies. Since October 2023, athletes and sports infrastructure have been impacted by the genocidal assault that Israel has inflicted on Gaza's people and its built environment. In addition to the athletes and coaches who have been killed, sports clubs and arenas have been destroyed, and stadiums used for mass arrests and mass graves. The essay also addresses the silence by international sporting bodies, including the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA), with regard to the destruction of sports infrastructure and genocide in Gaza more generally.

## Keywords:

Sports; genocide; youth; football; stadiums; FIFA; Gaza.

It is not only killings, massacres, torture, and starvation that constitute genocide, but also erasure of history and identity, and the destruction of cultural heritage. This includes Palestinian sports, which have been an integral part of Palestinian culture for over a century. In addition to enriching Palestinian culture, sports have been linked to the national identity of the Palestinian people and the moral development of Palestinian youth. Participation in sports has been seen as instilling a spirit of sharing, a willingness to give time and effort, a sense of self-sacrifice, a commitment to moral values of fairness and discipline,

and a love for their homeland, Palestine. Further, sport has served an important role, to strengthen bonds among Palestinian youth. Palestinian sports culture is diverse and intertwined with other cultural dimensions, as well as economics, politics, and the social world of Palestinians. Palestinian conditions have been unfavorable to the development of sports for a long time. However, at the same time, sports, acting as soft power, have played an important role in the Palestinian political landscape during the last few decades. For decades, Palestinian sports have been a nightmare for Israel because of their affirmation of Palestinian presence, as sports clubs use the name of Palestine, the Palestinian flag, and the Palestinian people, and athletes compete on their behalf.

## **Sports in Gaza's Modern History**

Sports flourished in Gaza since the 1920s. In March 1927, the Jaffa-based newspaper *Filastin* reported about a soccer game between the Orthodox Youth Club in Jaffa and the Gazan Youth Club, among the first athletic clubs established in Palestine: "What happened in Gaza recently was one of the most striking manifestations of this [sports] renaissance. Their patriotic spirit and affinity were evident during and after the game."<sup>1</sup> In 1934, the Gaza Sports Club was founded and other clubs were later formed in Gaza and Khan Yunis during the 1940s.

The center of gravity of Palestinian sports moved from Jaffa to Gaza after the Nakba. During the period of Egyptian administration in the Gaza Strip, there was a remarkable growth in a number of fields, including sports (which retained its Palestinian identity during this time).<sup>2</sup> From the early 1950s, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) also established service centers in Jabaliya, Rafah, Khan Yunis, al-Shati', al-Nusayrat, al-Burayj, and al-Maghazi camps, which became clubs with their own teams, participating in local and Arab championships and playing a leading role in the development of sports in Gaza. In 1962, the Gaza Sports Club was reestablished as the Palestinian Sports Federation for Football. Sports activists such as Elias Manna, Zaki Khayal, and Subhi Farah (who had been actively involved in the sports movement from the 1930s and 1940s) formed several sports federations to organize the majority of the games played at that time.

Palestine took part in the first Arab Games in 1953 and the third in Morocco in 1961. In 1966, Palestine participated in the Games of Emerging New Forces (GANEF) in Phnom Penh. As part of the delegation, there was prominent Palestinian sports leader Zaki Khayal, as well as administrators Zuhayr al-Dabbagh and Elias Manna from Gaza. A Palestinian team was assembled, bringing together members from inside Palestine (including Gaza) and refugees in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, however, Palestinian sports federations were not accepted by most international federations (with the exception of table tennis and basketball, recognized in 1964 and 1965 respectively), based on the pretext that there is no state named Palestine (after consulting with the United Nations) and that the Gaza Strip is governed by

Egyptian administration and does not possess an independent status under the law.<sup>4</sup> Only in the 1990s did the Palestine Olympic Committee gain recognition from the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the Palestine Football Association joined the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) in 1995 and 1998, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1970s, the Gaza Strip Association of Clubs (Rabitat al-Andiya) was formed. Gaza Strip and West Bank club associations cooperated with each other, and several football matches were played between the two associations.<sup>6</sup> Even after the Oslo accords, the Palestinian sports movement's center of gravity remained rooted in Gaza. Sports in Gaza was organized under the supervision of the Supreme Council for Youth and Sport. Despite the obstacles to Palestinian sports put in place by Israel's occupation, the sector grew until the Israeli siege on Gaza began in 2007. During this siege, the sports sector witnessed a decline due to Israeli restrictions as well as the political division between Fatah and Hamas. Since 2007, Israel also repeatedly targeted sports facilities, claiming they were being used to launch missiles. Despite this, around fifty-eight sports clubs were active in the Gaza Strip before 7 October 2023, with football teams competing in the first, second, and third divisions of the Gaza Strip Premier League.<sup>7</sup>

Israel's genocidal war has also caused significant destruction of sports infrastructure, following a pattern established since the 1948 Nakba. Hundreds of athletes and also coaches, sports leaders, and sports journalists have been killed and dozens of sports facilities have been destroyed – some accounts are that over 70 percent of the sports facilities located in the Gaza Strip have been destroyed – bringing about complete paralysis of all sports activities.<sup>8</sup> The full extent of destruction of and disruption to the sports sector is difficult to ascertain in conditions of ongoing genocide. However, the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports, the Palestinian Football Association, and colleagues working in the sports sector in the Gaza Strip have managed to gather some data and make informed estimates regarding the current situation.

## **Loss of Life**

Over 410 martyrs from the sports and scouting movements have been killed since the war began last October. The Palestinian Football Federation indicated in August 2024 that 297 child and youth footballers have been martyred since 7 October 2023.<sup>9</sup> Israel has targeted athletes in stadiums: a video clip broadcast by al-Jazeera on 10 July showed occupation forces bombing a group of displaced people while they played football in the yard of al-‘Awda School in ‘Abasan al-Kabira.<sup>10</sup> There are hundreds of examples of the brutality of the occupation directed toward athletes, including torture and martyrdom. Frayj al-Hallaq, a veteran athlete and an Alzheimer's patient, was executed by Israeli occupation forces, and left to bleed to death in front of al-Shifa Hospital. Nagham Abu Samra, a Palestinian karate champion and member of the Palestinian national team, was critically injured in the bombing of her home in al-

Nusayrat camp and died after one month in a coma. Long-distance runner and athletic coach Majed Abu Maraheel, who in 1996 became the first Palestinian to compete in the Olympic Games, died of kidney failure in Gaza, unable to receive treatment as a result of the siege and destruction of the Gazan health system.

In Gaza, clubs mourned the loss of cadres, players, athletes, and coaches. The Friendship (Sadaqa) Sports Club in Gaza City lost twenty members to Israel's bombs, and fifteen martyrs were killed when Israeli forces bombed the Ittihad al-Shuja'iyya Club.<sup>11</sup>

Arab sports communities also expressed their support and condolences for martyred Palestinian athletes. The Jordanian al-Wehdat Club grieved for the martyr Mohammed Barakat, formerly of the Palestinian national soccer team, and honored Hani al-Musaddar, a former player and assistant coach of the Palestinian Olympic soccer team, with a special tribute last June. Before he was martyred, during the time of intense raids and clashes in Khan Yunis, Barakat broadcast his last will and testament by posting a video to social media platforms: "I ask for forgiveness and prayers. My mother and father, beloved and dear to me, I entrust you to God ... These might be my last words and the last time you see me." He then recited verses from the holy Qur'an.<sup>12</sup>

## **Destruction of Infrastructure**

According to the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports in Gaza, material losses relating to sports have reached twenty million dollars or more as a result of the destruction of stadiums and various sports facilities.<sup>13</sup> Airstrikes, artillery shelling, and the ground invasion of the Gaza Strip have completely destroyed an estimated fifty clubs. Twelve club headquarters have been razed to the ground in Gaza province, leaving no trace behind. Seven clubs were bulldozed in the northern Gaza Strip and headquarters of five clubs were directly shelled in the central region. Six club headquarters were destroyed during the ground invasion of Khan Yunis.<sup>14</sup> The headquarters of the Gaza Sports Club and most of its facilities, including a football field, tennis courts, and a multipurpose indoor hall, were completely demolished. Shelling has leveled the headquarters of the Friends Equestrian Club as well as the Jabaliya Services Club. The Sadaqa Sports Club also paid a heavy price, as occupation forces destroyed the club's headquarters, the main stadium, and the indoor hall.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to clubs, the headquarters of the Palestinian Olympic Committee, the Palestinian Football Association, and the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports have been demolished, as have many stadiums. According to the Supreme Council for Youth and Sports, the most notable stadiums destroyed in northern Gaza and Gaza City are: Palestine Stadium, Yarmuk Stadium (built in 1951), Bayt Hanun Municipal Stadium, Bayt Lahiya Stadium, and the Gaza Sports Club.<sup>16</sup> Israel also bombed and destroyed the United Nations Development Program Stadium in Rafah, Khan Yunis Municipal Stadium and Sports City, al-Nusayrat Municipal Stadium and the baseball and softball stadium in al-Shati' Camp.

Those stadiums that remain standing have been transformed by the assault on Gaza. The Rafah Municipal Stadium was converted into a field hospital, and the headquarters of the Rafah Services Club became a distribution center for humanitarian aid to the displaced people in Rafah.<sup>17</sup> The Martyr Muhammad al-Durra Stadium has become a shelter for displaced Palestinians. In a report for al-Jazeera, Nelly al-Masry described the stadiums as places where sports have come to an end and fans' cheers have gone silent, replaced by the pain and groans of the displaced, forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in a stadium to survive.<sup>18</sup> Israel has also turned stadiums in the Gaza Strip into prisons, torture centers, and execution grounds. At the Yarmuk Stadium, dozens of civilians were forced to undress in the open. Dirt stadiums, including one adjacent to the Indonesian Hospital, to the north of Gaza, have been turned into mass graves.

## Other Destructive Effects

Like millions of others of Palestinians in Gaza, athletes have also been subject to the loss of livelihoods and homes. This war of extermination brought about a complete cessation and paralysis of sports activities. More than six thousand players, coaches, and sports cadres have lost their only source of income. They rely on humanitarian aid and cannot afford food and medicine for their families. Players, coaches, and club cadres have also been denied the opportunity to represent Palestine in recent Arab and international championships due to the war.<sup>19</sup> Many athletes, like others, were forced to leave their homes and neighborhoods, some of which were completely destroyed. In an interview with Nelly al-Masry, footballer Muhammad Silmi, who played for Egyptian al-Ahly Club, Ittihad Shuja'iyya, and Ittihad Bayt Hanun, summarized the conditions that so many athletes in Gaza endure:

I was forced to flee my home in the Shuja'iyya neighborhood in Gaza City due to the escalating conflict. I never dreamed that I would be displaced from the place where I have experienced the most beautiful moments of my life. This is the place where I have scored goals and celebrated with fans. However, whenever I enter that place, I feel distressed and suffering.

When the war started on October 7, the [Gaza] Premier League was still in its beginning. I played against my former team, Ittihad Shuja'iyya. I felt heartbroken because of my old teammates, with whom I had the greatest memories of my life. I felt a lot of sadness for them. As a consequence, all my dreams and ambitions were destroyed, and I was affected psychologically, physically, and spiritually.<sup>20</sup>

When al-Silmi was asked about his sixth displacement with his family between Gaza City and areas of the central governorate, he said, "I ultimately settled in al-Durra

Stadium, which is located in the middle of the Strip. My only concern at the beginning was to provide a tent for my family. I wanted to protect my children from the cold.”<sup>21</sup>

## **FIFA and Genocide**

The Palestinian Football Association is calling on FIFA and the International Olympic Committee to take a strong stand and hold the Israeli occupation accountable for the genocidal war going on in Gaza.<sup>22</sup> The Palestinian Football Association sent a draft resolution to the FIFA Congress in Bangkok on 17 May 2024 to hold Israel responsible for violations of Palestinian sports rights and to expel it from FIFA.<sup>23</sup> FIFA President Gianni Infantino, however, has rejected calls for a vote on the issue of expelling Israel from FIFA. He claimed that a legal assessment would be conducted as soon as the FIFA Council meets to discuss the allegations. Initially, the meeting was supposed to take place at the end of July, but it was then pushed to after the Paris Olympics, then to the end of August, and later rescheduled for the end of October. By postponing the request four times, FIFA has attempted to avoid making a fair decision in favor of the Palestinian Football Association. FIFA has long claimed a neutral position on the Israel-Palestine “conflict,” though it is obvious that any party that is neutral on this issue is complicit in Israel’s extermination war on the Gaza Strip and must be held accountable for its actions.

Both FIFA and Israel claim that the Palestinian Football Association is exploiting sports for political purposes. Sports and politics cannot be separated. No other activity seems able to evoke nationalistic and patriotic feelings as sports can. Furthermore, both FIFA and Israel use sport in politics when it serves their interests, even as they criticize the Palestinian Football Association when it challenges their interests.<sup>24</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Will it be possible to rebuild the destroyed and damaged sports infrastructure? And will sports in the Gaza Strip ever be the same as it was before the deaths of more than four hundred athletes and sports leaders, in addition to the destruction of the infrastructure? The answers to these questions are challenging, and speculating about the Gaza Strip’s political future is particularly difficult at this stage. Any recovery will be tough, but not impossible. Sports may not return to their former glory. However, as demonstrated throughout history, every time Israel attempts to destroy the Palestinian people, their history and culture come back stronger and more resilient than before. Among the many characteristics that distinguish our people is their ability to weather and recover from the harsh blows dealt to them. This is what we saw in the Gaza Strip after the Nakba. More recently, in 2023, the Palestinian national football team reached the second round of the Asian Cup for the first time in its history, despite the war of extermination to which Palestinians have been subjected. It also reached the final round of the World Cup qualifiers for the first time. Palestine participated in the

2024 Paris Olympics with the largest sports delegation since it began competing in the Olympics, and ‘Umar Yasir Hantuli qualified in taekwondo becoming the second Palestinian ever to qualify for the Olympics through qualification and points.

Sports in the Gaza Strip has a long history and roots that stretch back decades, demonstrating steadfastness against the ravages of war. Despite occupation and its obstacles, Palestinian sports has continued to grow and progress. Israel’s destruction of Palestinian sports may inspire Palestinian athletes to compete in the future and fight in the sports arena as a means of proving themselves. Certainly they will work hard to achieve their desired success. At the end of the day, the international community’s solidarity and support – as well as the Arab community’s support – in response to the suffering of our people in Palestine will have a significant impact on the rebuilding of the Palestinian sports movement and its infrastructure in Palestine.

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#### Endnotes

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