

# 'One way we can keep fighting is to keep playing - with our football we can show everyone we are still here as a people'

*Dublin friendly has huge historical and symbolic significance for Palestine players*

By Mark Gallagher

**S**ITTING in the dressing-room of the King Abdullah Sports City Stadium in Jeddah, conflicting thoughts raced through Mira Natour's mind. She was about to play the biggest match of her football career, the opening group game of the West Asian championship against Iraq, but part of her wondered if she and her team-mates should be playing at all.

'Of course, I was very conflicted. There were two contrasting emotions when we played in the West Asian Championship. One was before kick-off and for the 90 minutes, I was thinking about what was happening in Gaza, and I did wonder should we be playing?'

'But the greater emotion, and what was more important, was for us to represent Palestine and represent the people of Gaza,' explains Natour, who is from Beit

being part of the Palestine team that takes on Bohemians in a fund-raising friendly at Dalymount Park. It's an historic occasion, the first time that their national side has played in Europe, and Natour says the significance shouldn't be underestimated.

'This is an historical game, a significant moment that will show Palestine is present and still part of the nations of the world,' Natour said. 'And it is significant because people in Ireland are showing solidarity with what Palestinian people are going through.'

For most players, international football means packing your passport, meeting your team-mates in the hotel and having a few training sessions before representing your country. Playing for the Palestinian national team presents far greater challenges. Since Israel's occupation of the West Bank in 1967, it has been difficult to

get from one area to the other. There can be numerous checkpoints to pass through, which have only increased since the brutal Hamas attacks on October 7. And there are other obstructions, with the UN reporting in 2018 that there were more than 700 physical obstacles, such as earthmounds and trenches, restricting movement by car in the West Bank.

It means players are often late for training sessions, or sometimes miss them altogether. Striker Bisan Abuaita recalls sessions having to go ahead with only seven or eight players, as team-mates have been delayed or detained.

'They are often cancelled at short notice, with players told to train on their own or with local players. Just over a week ago, the team had organised a friendly against the Palestinian under-17 boys team in Ramallah, as preparation for the game against Bohs. However, without prior notice, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) closed the main checkpoint from Bethlehem,



chance for the squad - made up of players from the West Bank and also from the Palestinian diaspora in Canada, US, Sweden and Germany - to train together. It was similar in Saudi Arabia for the West Asian Championship.

This economic effect that nobody is talking about. I am lucky, I have kept my job, but some other NGOs have had to shut. Businesses have been shut down here in Bethlehem and I have seen the effect the stress has caused.

'And then there is the long-term effect on everyone's mental health, like if you are trying to call a colleague in the Gaza office and you can't get through, immediately you are going to think the worst.'

'Whenever this war stops, every single person in Palestine will need some form of help, therapy.'

'For people of my generation, in their 20s, this is the time when you are supposed to be going out in the world and trying new things, developing as a person, developing your interests and personality.'

'But all they are concerned about at the moment is surviving and that will have an effect on Palestinians for years to come,' Abuaita observes.

Natour is a defensive midfielder for the team, but she's also a



**GAME TIME:** Palestine (white) in action against the Emirates (main) and (below left) ahead of a clash with Thailand

medical intern and was going to answer the call to help hospitals in Gaza, but was talked out of it by her parents. 'They were sending out emails asking anyone with medical training to come because the situation was so stark. But my parents didn't want me to go - they were afraid if I went to Gaza, I wouldn't come back.'

'Of course, we hear about the awful situations in the hospitals, and it is not just those that have been killed or maimed by the aggression, but there are very sick people, people with cancer and diabetes who can't get their medicine at the moment, and they are dying because they won't let their medicine through.'

Given the awful situation in Gaza, and the effect it is having on all Palestinians, it is no wonder that both Natour and Abuaita see football as a release.

'When I am on a football field and playing football, I feel free and there aren't many times that Palestinians have that feeling of

freedom,' Abuaita says. However, even that freedom has been restricted. Natour remembers playing a game that has to be postponed because the IDF fired tear gas into the ground. All sports leagues, including football, have been suspended in Palestine since October 7th meaning that, apart from the players from Europe and North America, most of those who will play on Wednesday haven't played for their club in months.

Among the 34,900 killed by the Israeli onslaught are more than 200 athletes, including Nagham Abu Samara, a sporting icon in Gaza as world karate

**ICON:** Nagham Abu Samara is one of 200 athletes killed in the attacks



champion. She was due to participate in the Paris Olympics later this year. Also in that number are at least 164 footballers, including many prominent players and coaches who were beloved across

Palestine where football is by far the most popular sport. They include Hani al-Masdar, the 42-year-old coach of the Olympic soccer team who is regarded as Palestine's greatest-ever footballer, Mohammed Barakat, the 39-year-old striker who was the first player to score more than 100 goals in the Gazan league and Rafah Sports club goalkeeper Mahmoud Osama Al-Jazzar, who was killed in an airstrike this week.

The horror

## Football on the front line

PALESTINE has one of the longest footballing histories in the Middle East, with evidence of the game being played in an organised level from the early 1920s, having originally been introduced during the time of the British Mandate.

The Palestine Football Association was formed in 1952. But it was not until 1998 that they were eventually admitted to FIFA, despite trenchant Israeli opposition. The process culminated with then-FIFA boss Sepp Blatter visiting Rafah. Their national men's team playing their first game in a friendly against Lebanon a year later.

The women's team was established in 2003 and after a number of friendlies, they played their first competitive match in September 2005, a 9-0 defeat to Jordan in the West Asian Women's Championship. In that tournament, they also faced Syria, Iran and Bahrain.

Palestine have competed in seven of the eight West Asian Women's Championships since then, their best ever finish coming in 2014 when they finished runners-up. They reached the semi-finals this past February, losing to Jordan.

The first official football match in the Palestinian Women's League took place in Ramallah on February 10, 2011 between Diyar Bethlehem and Sarayyet Ramallah with more than 8,000 people in attendance at the Feisal al-Husseini stadium. The Women's league draws between six to eight



**FINDING A WAY:** Players prepare for a club game in the West Bank

teams, the numbers vary from year to year, from the West Bank with Diyar Bethlehem, for whom Mira Natour and Bisan Abuaita play, the most successful, having won the league five times.

There have also been efforts to get a women's league in Gaza, but sport has often been paralysed in the densely-populated strip of land. None of the players in Palestine women's national team come from Gaza. The game has been badly hampered by Israel's increasing control and occupation of Palestinian territory. Players, coaches, officials and equipment have all suffered restrictions on their freedom of movement. Cup finals have been postponed or abandoned because of gas attacks.

In 2007, 18 members of their men's national team were denied exit visa for a crucial World Cup qualifier against

Singapore, and had to forfeit the game in a 3-0 defeat.

The following May, the team were not allowed to travel to the 2008 AFC Challenge Cup. Palestinian footballers have routinely been targeted by the Israeli army and security forces, even before the Hamas attacks of October 7th. In one of the shocking incidents, two teenage players in the West Bank, Jawhar Nasser Jawhar and Adam Abd al-Raouf Halabiya, were on their way home from the Faisal al-Husseini Stadium on January 31, 2014. When they approached a checkpoint, Israeli forces fired bullets into their feet to ensure they would never play football again.

Despite the challenges and the deliberate targeting of footballers and football infrastructure, the game remains the most popular sport for both men and women in Palestine.

think that sport can be used in this way, but I also understand why athletes themselves would be reluctant to engage in any kind of boycott, because athletes have spent their whole life, training and trying to be the best, so perhaps it is unfair to ask them to make a stand. It is more to do with the likes of FIFA and IOC,' Abuaita points out.

'But, for us, one way that we can keep fighting, and keep reminding people of what is happening, is to keep playing. That is why it is so significant to play this match in Dublin. Football is one way of showing everyone that we are still here as a people.'

■ *Bohemians v Palestine is on this Wednesday, May 15 in Dalymount Park at 7.45pm. All proceeds to Sport for Life Palestine, Medical Aid for Palestine & Aclai Palestine. Tickets from www.bohemiansfc.ie. Those who cannot be present but wish to support the venture can purchase non-attendance tickets from €5.*

**It will show we are still present, we are still part of the nations of the world**

Lahm, a small village outside Bethlehem on the West Bank.

'That is the most important thing. We were playing for them, representing them. We were playing football to show the world that we still exist, and that we are still playing football. That's our purpose, to show that Palestine is present, that we are here and we have the right to play football, play sport, just like anybody else.'

Despite the utter devastation and horror that was being inflicted on the people of Gaza, Palestine performed superbly to qualify from their group back in February, losing to eventual winners, Jordan in the semi-final.

Just like the men's team's achievement in getting out of their group in the West Asian championship, it was a testament to the spirit of the Palestinian people.

It is Natour's 25th birthday this Wednesday, which also happens to be the 76th anniversary of the Nakba, and she will mark it by