

# Palestine Marathon



By Eitedal Ismail



**“Nothing happens until something moves.”**

*Albert Einstein*

**So, let's move!**

Once a year in the spring, local residents from the Bethlehem area, Palestinians from near and far, and people from all over the world gather in Bethlehem to participate in one of the highlights of the city's social and cultural calendar. They don running shoes, put on sunscreen and a hat, and flock to the alleys and streets of the ancient town south of Jerusalem, either to engage in physical exercise or to cheer on their friends and relations, some of whom will have trained for months in the hope of winning a prize or an honorable mention.

The Palestine Marathon aims to establish a running culture in Palestine. It entices Palestinians to move in a new, enjoyable way, provides the opportunity for cultural exchange, and helps build relationships between Palestinians and people from around the world based on a mutual love for running. The event shows the international community another side of Palestinians; it creates international awareness of the Palestinian story, increases knowledge of Palestinian life, culture, and hospitality, and builds understanding across cultures. Moreover, the annual marathon adds value to the Palestinian economy and the tourism sector.

Palestine Marathon 2019 held in Bethlehem, Palestine.



In 2017, the Palestine Marathon was approved as an international marathon by the International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF), and in 2018, it was recognized by the Association for International Marathons and Distance Races (AIMS). Its route extends over 42.195 kilometers and offers runners different outlooks on Palestinian everyday life. Its course includes a few steep hills and sections that allow for fast running while leading through unique scenery, unlike any other marathon. Starting at the Church of the Nativity, in the center of Bethlehem's Old City, its route takes runners through the town, two refugee camps (Aida and Dheisheh), and along the apartheid Wall. Because its distance does not cover the required

42 kilometers, runners run two loops to complete a full marathon according to international standards.

The Palestine Marathon has evolved rapidly over the years. In seven years, the total number of participants has increased from 400 to over 8,000. The percentage of female runners has increased from 37 percent to almost 50 percent (which is significant because the denial of free movement is a feature of gender inequality in Palestinian society and hinders efforts to ensure respect for the rights of women), and the number of foreign runners has increased from 220 to 1,700, helping Palestinian efforts to tell their story and raise international awareness of their situation.

Runners in the Palestine Marathon 2019.





The Palestine Marathon is becoming increasingly popular both locally and internationally. Photo courtesy of welcometopalestine.com



Running by the apartheid Wall. Photo courtesy of enjoybethlehem.com

**The Palestine Marathon provides a platform for cultural exchange and exploration. It attracts thousands of Palestinian and international participants and brings attention to one of the basic human rights that is under threat in the State of Palestine: the freedom of movement.**

The marathon cannot help but show how the Israeli occupation prevents Palestinian freedom of movement, a universally recognized human right. According to Article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all people should be able to move around and reside anywhere within their country. By running the marathon, each participant asserts this right and highlights that the freedom of movement of Palestinian

women, men, girls, and boys continues to be severely restricted under Israel's prolonged military occupation.

The apartheid Wall - deemed illegal by the International Court of Justice in 2004 but still standing tall - prevents Palestinians from exercising their basic human right to freedom of movement and separates them from their land and from each other. But impediments to freedom of movement reach far beyond the Wall. Military checkpoints in the West Bank are further obstacles that have a devastating impact on Palestinian lives and livelihoods, particularly adversely affecting people with disabilities who already face many barriers in their daily lives. The blockade of Gaza prevents the movement of people and goods, stifles recovery efforts, destroys the local economy, divides families and communities, and prevents sick persons from receiving treatment that is not available locally. Israel's legitimate security requirements must be balanced with respect for human rights.

In 2019, participants ran for various causes such as human rights and the rights of the disabled, women, children, and others; others competed for organizations that included EU for Palestine, Team Palestine (Every Mile Saves a Child), Right to Education, and more. Many cultural activities were offered by partners, local organizations, and the public sector. In 2020, the Palestine Marathon will be held on March 27, starting at Bethlehem's Manger Square, with the participation of 10,000 local and international runners. This marathon will be held under the umbrella of Bethlehem - Capital of Arab Culture.

Eitedal Ismail is the general director of the Palestine Marathon.

The Palestine Marathon is held under the auspices of the Palestinian Higher Council for Youth and Sports and plays an important role in increasing awareness of matters that include the restrictions on movement that Palestinians face on a daily basis due to

**Marathon runners anywhere may "hit a wall" under the physical and emotional strain of completing the 42-kilometer race course. In the State of Palestine, runners literally hit the Wall.**

the Israeli occupation. Many foreigners participate and gain a glimpse of the rich Palestinian culture that is not widely known across the world. The marathon could not be successful without the cooperation of our partners that include the Bethlehem Governorate, the Bethlehem Municipality, the Palestinian Police, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education, Bethlehem Peace Center, the Palestinian Medical Relief Society, Sareyyet Ramallah, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Society, and others.