

The Rebirth of Palestinian Football 1908–2019

Courtesy of the Palestinian Football Association
Translated by Elias Khayyo



Palestinians cheering their football team.

Jerusalem – The PFA Media Department – The Palestinian Football Association was established in 1928 in Jerusalem. It rejoined FIFA and the AFC in 1998.

Palestine's relationship to football dates back to the beginnings of the twentieth century. Its first 38 years saw brilliant accomplishments in terms of laying the foundation for football, as the first football team was established in 1908 at Al-Rawda School in Jerusalem. Football flourished in the 1920s, during the British occupation of Palestine. Palestine participated in the qualifying competitions at the 1934 World Cup, which was held in Italy. The results of the two Palestine vs. Egypt matches were decisive in reaching the Italy World Cup, as Palestine had lost both matches against Egypt in Jerusalem and Cairo, which qualified Egypt to participate in the finals. This made the Palestinian national football team the first Arab Asian national team to participate in the World Cup qualifications. Palestine also participated in the World Cup qualifications in 1938.

The same period witnessed a marked development in Palestinian football, and many official and friendly games were held on playfields in Jerusalem, Jaffa, Haifa, Gaza, and other Palestinian cities. In addition, Palestine began to host Arab teams from the neighboring countries of Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan.



الاتحاد الفلسطيني لكرة القدم

Following the events of the *Nakba* in 1948, and as a consequence of the Israeli aggression and the displacement of the Palestinian people from its land, the Palestinian football stars were

scattered in refugee camps in various neighboring Arab countries and the diaspora. Yet Palestinian football soon recovered, and the Palestinian team (comprised of players from Gaza and the diaspora) participated in the First Arab Tournament in Alexandria in 1953 and in subsequent Arab tournaments. The greatest achievement for Palestinian football was reaching the semi-finals in the Fourth Arab Tournament held in Cairo in 1964.

With the return of the Palestinian National Authority to the homeland in 1994, Palestinian football entered a new era with the reformation and election of the Palestinian Football

Association and its re-entry into the International Football Association Federation (FIFA) and the Asian Football Confederation (AFC). In 1998, official domestic competitions started to become regular, and Palestinian football began again to participate in Arab, continental, and international championships.

The first official participation of the national team in the Arab arena occurred in the qualification matches for the 1998 Arab Cup, held in Lebanon. The Palestinian national team also participated in the Ninth Arab Tournament, held in Jordan in 1999, where the national team managed to win the bronze medal.

General Jibril Al-Rajoub with his football team.



The Asian Football Confederation also chose the Palestine national team as the best team in Asia in August 1999. Furthermore, our national team participated in the First West Asian Football Federation Championship (Al-Hussein Cup), which was held in Jordan in 2000.

In 2001, and after over 66 years, Palestine returned to participate in the World Cup qualifying competitions and attained second place in its group following Qatar; it was chosen as the best Asian national team in March 2001. It also participated in the West Asian Championship in Syria in 2002, whereas the Palestinian Olympic team participated in the Asian Games Tournament (Busan) in South Korea.

Despite the aforementioned achievements, the Israeli restrictions and the modest capabilities and expertise of Palestinian sports were apparent, especially since almost no domestic championships or tournaments were completed before 2008.

Yet with the election of General Jibril Al-Rajoub as president of the PFA in 2008, Palestinian football started to see an unprecedented boom at all levels, with the construction of facilities, the holding of training courses, the development of national

teams for all categories and for both genders, and the achievement of a level of competitiveness and parity with participation in continental and international participations at the level of clubs and teams with the most well-established clubs and national teams, which imparted continental and international respect and appreciation for this unprecedented development.

Al-Fida'i was ranked 84th globally following its win of the title in the AFC Challenge Cup championship held in the Maldives in 2014, which led to its qualification for the first time in the history of Palestinian football to the finals of the Asian Nations Championship in Australia in 2015. It also received the Best National Team in the Asian Continent Award for 2014 during the annual ceremony held by the Asian Confederation.

Al-Fida'i participated in the double qualifications for the World Cup 2018 and the Asia Cup 2019, and occupied third place in its group behind the Saudi and Emirati national teams. It eventually qualified for the Asia Cup 2019 finals in the United Arab Emirates for the second time in its history, and achieved the position of 73rd globally, which is its best rank ever.

As to the Olympic Fida'i, its true debut was in 2011, during its participation in

the Asian qualification for the London 2012 Olympics finals. It managed to qualify for the second round after surpassing the Thailand national team, whereas it lost against the Bahrain team by goal difference following its win in Al-Manama 1–0 and its loss in the Faisal al-Husseini International Stadium 1–2.

The Olympic team participation in the 2014 AFC Asian Cup in the South Korean city of Incheon was a landmark which indicated that the development of Palestinian national teams is no longer limited to the first team, after the Olympic team qualification to the second round by winning against Oman and Tajikistan, although it was disqualified in the second round after losing against Japan.

The most outstanding achievements of the Olympic team occurred in the beginning of 2018, when the Palestinian Olympic team reached the second round in the 2018 AFC U-23 Championship held in China, after achieving exceptional results in the groups round, before losing with difficulty in the quarterfinal round 2–3.

At the level of the rest of the national teams, Palestine has always been present in age-group championships, indoor football, and beach football, and has qualified several times in the Asia Cup finals and achieved many positive results. This was not limited to participation outside of Palestine in various qualifying competitions for national teams, as Palestine had hosted qualifying competitions several times for youths and juniors from both genders, which reflects the extent of development attained by the Palestinian Football Association over the past decade concerning the infrastructure and the organization of domestic, regional, and continental championships at the highest levels in accordance with international regulations and laws.



Headquarters of the Palestinian Football Association in Al-Ram, north of Jerusalem.

Article photos courtesy of the Palestinian Football Association.