

Tokyo League 3 – 2019 Tournament



By Abdel-Nasser Barakat

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Tokyo 3 Soccer League, funded by the Government of Japan and implemented by UNDP's Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People, in cooperation with the Palestinian Football Association, is a milestone of 2019; it is the third edition, but the first to include teams from the country's northern and southern governorates.

The idea to convene the winner (champion) from the northern governorate and the winner (champion) from southern governorates, the other part of Palestine, motivated teams to employ all efforts to play in the final, which took place in Gaza, pitting the representative of northern governorates (*Shabab Al-Khalil* – Hebron Youth) against the representative of southern governorates (*Ittihad Khan Younis*). Indeed, 65 clubs participated in this tournament (49 from the Gaza Strip and 16 from the West Bank, comprising a total of 1,380 players).

Engaging youth in sports.



The crowds cheering at the final Tokyo League 3 match in Gaza.

Playgrounds in the northern and southern governorates were in constant use for two months in the same tournament for the same age groups – an honest competition with matches sometimes played in the rain. The sun would sometimes rise as if showing compassion for these athletes and their mission. They kick the ball for a better future in all aspects for Palestinian citizens.

In Palestine, it is not possible to isolate sports from Palestinian daily life and its inherent challenges. *Shabab Al-Khalil* needed special permits to enter the southern governorates. As usual, the Israeli side did not issue permits for all the players and administrative staff. However, the passion for playing, the determination to succeed, and the consolidated efforts of the Palestinian Football Association, the Japanese government, and UNDP made the final match a reality.

Shabab Al-Khalil players who made it to the Gaza Strip were welcomed by large crowds; it is not a football game with a winner and loser, but much

more. All athletes looked forward to this unusual youth event because – notwithstanding the difficulties associated with these events – the adult teams from the southern and northern governorates have repeatedly played together.

Most *Shabab Al-Khalil* players were in the Gaza Strip for the first time in their lives. How will this match unfold? It is not only the players and administrators who are anxious but entire families as well experience mixed feelings of anxiety and joy. They waited to watch their children play on TV in a match that does not take place every day, and which was played amidst tremendous threats due to the unstable political and security situation. Players of *Ittihad Khan Younis* faced another type of emotional challenge. For the first time, they played on their field in front of their local fans against a team with whom they had never before competed. Families of Khan Younis players had to choose between watching their children in the stadium



Shabab Al-Khalil following their tour in Gaza's seaport.



H.E. Takeshi Okubo, Ambassador of Japan, and UNDP Representative, Roberto Valent, holding the championship cup.



Crowds cheering Shabab Al-Khalil and Ittihad Khan Younis.

or on TV. Many of them took time off from work and daily worries to watch the game.

As the time set for the match approached – the last practice for both teams on the eve of the match – it was very moving to see the players and the fans who came for a picture with the teams. It was like a national sport day *par excellence*.

The match was an exceptional scene, with the audience cheering indiscriminately for both teams. It was attended by the Japanese ambassador, representatives of the Palestinian Sports Association, and UNDP.

Ittihad Khan Younis won the match, but Shabab Al-Khalil had already won when they entered the southern governorates. The goal was achieved. Mixed tears of joy and sadness. The tournament ended, and the goals were realized when young athletes met and were united by football. They were together at the same time and in the same place in an event long awaited by the people. Hope remains that this event will become a recurrent one and that the Palestinian people achieve their national rights with a unified independent state with its capital Holy Jerusalem.

Article photos courtesy of UNDP/PAPP.

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Shabab Al-Khalil football team while touring Gaza.



H.E. Takeshi Okubo, Ambassador of Japan, and UNDP Representative, Roberto Valent, and representatives of the Palestinian Sports Association.



Crowds cheering Shabab Al-Khalil and Ittihad Khan Younis.