

Palestinian soccer drama—'Team' building for social change

Posted By [Alon Raab](#) On 11 May 2010 @ 21:51 In [Israel](#), [Media & Music](#), [Middle East](#) | [1 Comment](#)

Editor's note

Football-based soap operas or, in Latin America, telenovelas, like the game itself, reflect culture and a culture's self-image. Italy's Mediaset used the reality-show format to produce [Campioni](#)^[1], concerning a hodgepodge side's attempt to avoid relegation from one of Italy's lower divisions. In Mexico, [El juego de la vida](#)^[2] (The Game of Life) focuses on a team of comely 17-year-old girls and their love interests. There are countless other examples. The nonprofit [Search for Common Ground](#)^[3] has helped create versions of football dramas—all titled [The Team](#)^[4]—as a tool for conflict resolution in Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya and Morocco. The Palestine edition, about which [Alon Raab](#) writes below, is in post-production. Similar series are at various stages in Angola, Congo, Indonesia, Liberia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe. Radio programs have aired in Ethiopia and are planned for Burundi and Guinea.

The Kenyan show, which aims to help redress violence following 2007 general elections, is [available online](#)^[5] via LinkTV. In an interesting departure, the side is co-ed.



Production on *The Team*, what the show's creator calls "a soap opera for social change," began in 2008. (© 2009 Ma'an)

by [Alon Raab](#) | Bethlehem, West Bank

In Bethlehem's Manger Square, under a full moon, two lovers recite poetry—Palestinian national bard [Mahmoud Darwish](#)^[6]'s words of affection and longing. Shadows cast on the stones of Christ's birthplace unite. The scene shifts to an acrimonious meeting at a sports club. Debate flares over which game to watch—Real Madrid v. Barcelona or Zamalek v. Al-Ahly? Conversation spills over to politics. One club member, nicknamed "Platini," declares that "we should live the way we believe."

Welcome to [The Team](#)^[7], a 30-part dramatic series recently completed in the West Bank and soon to be broadcast on Palestinian television station Ma'an.

Last fall I traveled from Jerusalem to meet the series creators and to watch filming. Leaving Mount Zion, legendary resting place of King David, I take a cab to the border. After passing the Jewish neighborhood of Talpiot and the new and politically contentious settlement of Gilo, I arrive at the checkpoint. In a large concrete and barbed-wire structure, in front of glaring soldiers, rows of Palestinians present their documents and wait to be fingerprinted. On the Palestinian side I enter another cab, whose young driver volunteers to point out places from the gospel narratives—King Herod's imposing palace-fortress Herodium and Shepherds' Field, where an angel appeared to reveal "good tidings of great joy."

Near the station I walk past two powder-blue Mercedes, each flying the flags of Real Madrid and Barcelona. I pass a sign, "Palestinian Conflict Resolution Office," and another, "Committee for the Freeing of Political Prisoners." In a stationery store a young woman sells me locally produced notebooks with a large globe on the cover.

I meet first with the show's creator, writer and director, **Nabil Shoumali**, who studied film in Prague. He directed and produced episodes for the Palestinian version of *Sesame Street*, *The Stars*—Palestine's first televised university quiz show—and documentaries including *A State of Fifty Years* and *Potash*, about the destructive effects of dredging minerals from the Dead Sea. He also has taught screenwriting at Bethlehem University.

During a screening of the first episode, Shoumali jokes that *The Team* is a "soap opera for social change." Other TV series focus on inside workings of soccer clubs, such as *Dream Team* (UK) and *The Champion* (Israel), but they emphasize romantic entanglements and power struggles. These aspects appear in *The Team*, but the political and social realities of Palestinian life under occupation, as well as a strong desire to resolve problems creatively and peacefully, are what distinguish the Palestinian program as an evocative work of art.

The political events affecting Palestinians' daily lives, including economic hardship, land confiscation and resistance weave seamlessly into the plot. We see effects of high unemployment as two players, **Tony** and **Hakim**, sneak into Israel for work despite the great risk. Another player, **Abu Ayaad**, flees from the Israeli army, while **Ahmed** is injured by a rubber bullet during a demonstration and later is arrested by Israeli soldiers on his hospital bed.

Gender relations are an important theme. Featured are several strong women including **Zeinah**, mother of one of the players.

After her husband's death she decides not to marry his brother, as dictated by custom, but begins studies at Bethlehem University.

The series also addresses painful issues such as "honor killings." The student **Samira** is murdered by her brother, and Zeinah writes a strongly worded open letter to Palestinian society condemning this horrific practice and challenging existing mores. Her writing helps bring these injustices to light.

Without compromising on story or entertainment, Shoumali and fellow creators emphasize the rule of law and freedom of association, challenges faced by women, peaceful conflict resolution and the importance of pursuing one's dreams. Placing an athletic club at the center of the action evokes the early history of Palestinian sports when such clubs were centers of cultural and political life and identity-building. Archival footage helps show the effects on football of larger historical realities such as the 1948 Nakba—the exodus of some 750,000 Palestinian Arabs following the civil war and the creation of Israel as a modern state.

In *The Team*, players are active in the community; for example, special events are organized for the disabled. Similar to the recent history of the Palestinian national team, which lost members to Israeli attacks and arrests, members of the fictional club are also imprisoned.

In conversation Shoumali expresses his appreciation for the game's beauty. This love comes through clearly in *The Team*. We see children playing in the street like their brethren around the world, their shirts bearing the names of soccer heroes. We learn about club dynamics—conflicting egos and coaching philosophies as well as the way that individuals meld into a team with common goals, reflecting the series' aim of fostering such unity in society at large.

"We wanted to transmit values of peace and to do that you need to convince, not impose," Shoumali says. An ex-Marxist, he emphasizes the importance of living together with the Israelis and of communication, with each side recognizing the other's humanity. "War is the corpse of all civilized things ... our dreams should be connected."

Cinematographer **Mohammad Fawzi** echoes this desire for a peaceful and just solution. Asked about his connection to sports he responds that during the second intifada he and other cameramen got all the exercise they needed dodging bullets. Fawzi worked for Dutch TV and for Al Jazeera. His film *Siege*, about the blockade Israeli forces imposed on Palestinian fighters taking refuge in the Church of the Nativity won awards at the Tunis and Cairo film festivals. He also directed a film about Jewish settlers.

I also meet **Raed Otham**, Ma'an's general director. His house was destroyed during an Israeli bombing; his uncle, a physician whose portrait hangs on the office wall, was killed by a missile. Yet Otham emphasizes the need to be active in shaping one's individual and collective identity.

"Everyone is playing with us, all the powers and states, but I am player, not a ball," he says. He speaks of his training as an engineer and political activism that resulted in a prison sentence. In 1996, a poem by Syrian **Nizar Qabbani**, "A Drawing by Blood"—"I tried to pray to many Gods / at the end I discovered I pray for myself"—moved Otham to "think beyond the big slogans such as 'the Holy Land.'" Other experiences, along with literary works such as **Paulo Coelho's** *The Alchemist* (see [8 Nov 07](#) ^[8]), convinced him to leave politics. Otham turned to culture, believing that "culture and justice bring peace." He continues:

Palestinians always show the victims, the evils of the occupation. That exists, but we wanted to concentrate on the personal lives, what happens at home, relations between people. We are presenting a new look at the Palestinians. Many people in the West have images of Palestinians as bad people. With drama we can speak about our dreams, how to build things together, how we will be when we have our own state, the power of the group to shape its future. The team represents the Palestinian society.

The Team is a co-production of Ma'an, an independent non-profit Palestinian news agency and media network, and Search for Common Ground. In eight years of existence Ma'an has excelled in news reporting and in producing dramas, including the popular *Seriously Joking*. Committed to Palestinian political and cultural independence, Ma'an has remained open to multiple perspectives. It regularly runs Israeli TV news broadcasts and interviews with leading Israeli journalists and scholars. Despite its professional and peaceful approach, in January Israeli authorities deported Ma'an's English-language editor.

Search for Common Ground helps create radio and television programs that offer alternatives to conflict. Soccer provides a logical subject and common language in many places where ethnic and national enmity prevail. The Palestinian series will soon be followed by an Israeli series based in the city of Ramleh/al-Ramlah where Jews and Arabs live side by side, but not always harmoniously.

Later in the day of my visit, crews film several scenes at a match between Palestinian team Shabab Al-Khalil and Wahdat Amman from Jordan. The match takes place in the crowded Al-Hussein stadium in Hebron, and spectators include Palestinian Prime Minister **Salam Fayyad**. The importance of the sport to Palestinian national aspirations and sense of identity is also clear a month later at a game between the national women's teams of Palestine and Jordan, witnessed by 12,000.

As I leave the studio and head back to the border crossing we drive past a half-built structure. "Hotel Paradise," a sign declares.

Additional reading

On the history of Palestinian sports see **Issam Khalidi**, "[Body and Ideology: Early Athletics in Palestine \(1900–1948\)](#)" ^[9], "*Jerusalem Quarterly* 27 (summer 2006): 44–58; and idem, "[The Zionist Movement and Sports in Palestine](#)" ^[10], "*The Electronic Intifada*, 27 Apr 09.

1 Comment To "Palestinian soccer drama—'Team' building for social change"

#1 Comment By [Madiba Magic](#) On 15 May 2010 @ 03:49

Thanks, Alon, for this thoughtful contribution. I hope to show the Palestinian *The Team* series to my students. It is intriguing to

see how quickly this series has spread outside the West. The one in Kenya is hugely popular. It is also fascinating to learn how this "football soapie" form has been used in so many locally specific ways to humanize the lives of people struggling to survive. Peace.

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URLs in this post:

[1] *Campioni*: <http://www.campioniilsogno.mediaset.it/legiornate.shtml>

[2] *El juego de la vida*: <http://www.esmas.com/eljuegodelavida/>

[3] Search for Common Ground: <http://www.sfcg.org>

[4] *The Team*: <http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/cgp/the-team.html>

[5] available online: <http://www.linktv.org/theteam>

[6] **Mahmoud Darwish**: <http://www.mahmouddarwish.com/>

[7] *The Team*: http://www.maannet.org/EnglishSite/Television_Drama_Series_The_Team.html

[8] 8 Nov 07: <http://www.theglobalgame.com/blog/2007/11/invisible-chain-of-solidarity-football-generated-passions-says-coelho-will-propel-brazil-toward-2014/>

[9] Body and Ideology: Early Athletics in Palestine (1900–1948): http://jerusalemquarterly.org/images/ArticlesPdf/27_khalidi.pdf

[10] The Zionist Movement and Sports in Palestine: <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article10484.shtml>

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