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# For Palestinians In And Out Of Refugee Camps, Al Wihdat Is More Than A Soccer Team



Omar Almasri  
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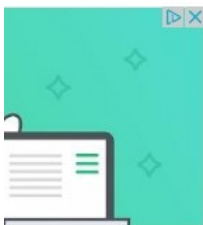
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Internationally, Al Wihdat is as obscure as any pro side could be. For the people that care about the team, though—a fan community that reaches from refugee camps across some of the most disputed borders in the world—it's not just a side to support. The club is named after the Al Wihdat refugee camp, also known as the Amman New Camp, which was established in 1955, seven years after the Nakba, or "catastrophe," in which around 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes and villages such as Deir Yassin, Ein Al Zaytoun, Balad Al Sheikh, and Al Dawayima by Zionist militant groups; the soccer team was established in 1956.

For those displaced people (including those in my family, who hail from the depopulated Palestinian villages of Samakh and Hadatha), Al Wihdat is a team that represents them—Jordan's large Palestinian population, who were expelled and fled their occupied homeland in the hopes of rebuilding lives shattered by conflict, displacement, and the ongoing occupation. It's a responsibility the team itself takes seriously. "We represent all Palestinian people and we play like we represent them," said Ahmed Elias, who plays for Al Wihdat. "We try to draw a smile on their faces."



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“After the Nakba of 1948,” recalls Zakaria Al Awadi, a sports journalist close to the club, “a great number of Palestinians sought refuge in Jordan to escape death. A majority of them hail from [depopulated] Palestinian villages like Al Lydd, Beersheba, Bait Nabala, Al Ramla, Al Abbasiya, and Deir Tarif. The first place they headed towards was Al Karama, where preliminary camps were created for them in light of assurances that they would be allowed to return to their homes. But unfortunately that promise never came to fruition.” The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees in the Near East was established to deal with the rising number of refugees and today runs around 60 refugee camps in which around five million Palestinians live. The Wihdat refugee camp is one of the first four camps set up after the dispossession in 1948, and houses over 51,000 refugees in a space smaller than half a square mile in size.

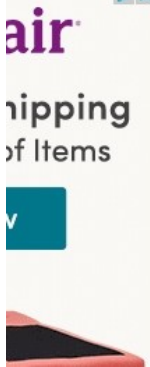
When Al Wihdat won their first league title in 1980, five years after promotion to Jordan’s top flight, Dag Tuastad, a Senior Lecturer at the University of Oslo and author of *Al Wihdat: The Pride of the Palestinians in Jordan*, said that huge celebrations erupted not only in Jordan, but also in Palestine itself. Fans chanted slogans comparing the players to “fedayeen,” or Palestinian guerrilla fighters. “When they grabbed their first cup in 1980, that still holds a special place,” recalled Nasser Al Amayra, who works for the Palestinian FA. “It was 1-0 for Al Wihdat, which was suspended and later won the replay two goals to one. It was the launching point.”

Like many fans, Al Wihdat supporters have created a language with which to support their team—a special honk of car horns and chants like “God, Wihdat, and Jerusalem is Arabian,” and “I’m a Wihdaty, son of the refugee camps,” that are as much about Palestine as the team. But there’s something else at work here. “Al Wihdat supporters differ a lot from other supporters,” said Omar Anati, a photographer who works for the club. “The passion for it isn’t just for the trophies and accolades, but also because of the homeland, our homeland, that was robbed and taken away from us. And so the club is the only part or symbol that remains or remained as a reminder of our dispossession. Because of this, our support of this club reaches the point of death.”

This is never more true than in the case of Al Wihdat’s highly-contested rivalry with Jordan’s most successful club, Al Faisaly. It goes beyond their competition for silverware as the two biggest football clubs in the country, and is grounded in their identities and background. While Al Wihdat are mainly supported by Palestinians, Al Faisaly is mainly supported by East Bankers or Hashemite Jordanians—fans who, as football journalist James Montague noted, see themselves as the “true Jordanians.”

“Al Am’ari and Al Wihdat are two sides of the same coin,” said Firas Arouri, a spokesperson for Al Am’ari. “They are both refugee camps and have both gone through the same hurdles, even though they are situated in different locations. Al Wihdat’s colors are always donned by our faithful and you can regularly hear chants supportive of Al Wihdat whenever Al Am’ari scores.”

Al Wihdat’s devotion to its Palestinian fanbase can also be seen through their participation in Palestine-based competitions such as the Al Areeha Winter Championship and Al Nakba Championship, where they’ve forged partnerships both on a club and supporter level with Palestinian clubs such as Al Ahli Gaza, Al Am’ari and Al Dhahiriyah. In 2014, the club organized a fundraiser in support of Palestinians cornered in Gaza during the seven week-long Israeli incursion into the blockaded territory, which left over two thousand Palestinians dead and many thousands homeless after the destruction of 18,000 homes in whole or part, and attacks on schools, universities, hospitals, and Gaza’s sole power plant.



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here, and the majority root for Al Wihdat.”

One match stands above the rest when it comes to Palestinian soccer—the historic clash between the Green Ultras and Maccabi Kafr Kanna, once one of the best of the 1948 Palestinian clubs, back in 1996. The fact that the match happened at all was remarkable, according to the son of Kafr Kanna’s former president Faisal Al Khatib, who is now the head of the club’s supporters group, Mubarak. “After the efforts to hold the match against Al Wihdat went astray, because of fixtures and failure to find a proper location for such a match, we later discovered that the main reason was the fact Kafr Kanna had Jewish-Israeli players on its squad,” said Mubarak. “Al Wihdat interpreted it as an attempt of political normalization between Israeli and Jordanian sport, and they refused to be the first among Jordanian sides to accept this.”

That “anti-normalization” move by Al Wihdat threatened to derail the game, but Faisal Al Khatib refused to submit and Al Wihdat ultimately reconsidered its position. The match was finally held at the club’s sports hall, which ended in Al Khatib’s side’s favor, 3-2. “I remember that [Al Wihdat versus Maccabi Kafr Kanna] match very well,” said the Palestinian sports journalist Ahmad Al Buhairi. “I was a producer and presenter of a sports show for Al Balad radio at the time. I remember the coverage from the Arab and Hebrew media, and the immense love, as well as the endearment towards the club’s players from us 1948 Arabs. This game of course helped the kids and young adults become more familiar with Al Wihdat, which increased their love towards the club.”



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goalkeeper and current manager, who has played for numerous clubs in both Israel and Palestine like Maccabi Tamra and Al Ahli Khalil. “We felt we were amongst our family, our people.”

“It was of great pleasure to meet my brethren. I felt that I was at my home and amongst my family,” Issa said. “The atmosphere was quite good, but it gave us a feeling that we’re unwanted. Let those who judge us know that we are the sons of historic Palestine and no one has a monopoly on the Palestinian identity. Our grandfathers lived and resided on this land and we are their descendants.”

Samir Issa’s concern and apprehension are easy to understand. As Palestinians who live, breathe, and carry citizenship in the country that has displaced and expelled many of his compatriots, Issa and other 1948 Palestinians have a foot in two worlds. But his stance and steadfast pride in his Palestinian identity are also what Al Wihdat is all about, and what binds supporters to a team unlike many on earth—a club created by Palestinians, proud of being Palestinian, and unabashed in keeping their cause and identity alive and robust in the face of relentless adversity.

*Omar Al-Masri is a freelance writer who focuses on the fusion of Middle Eastern football and politics. You can read his writing at his blog [o-posts](#), and elsewhere.*



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