

Israel's aggression forces Palestinian football team Lajee Celtic to stop playing



A view of an empty Lajee Celtic pitch with Palestinian flag murals on the far wall
Lajee Celtic football club, informally known as Aida Celtic, was formed in 2016 [Maurico Morales/Al Jazeera]

Ramallah, December 12 (RHC)-- Israeli military watchtowers loom over Lajee Celtic's football pitch, as much of the Aida refugee camp near Bethlehem is surrounded by the grey, graffiti-covered Israeli separation wall. In times of relative normality, the pitch would be full of Palestinian footballers playing under the gaze of Israeli occupation.

But since October 7, when Israel's latest war of aggression on Gaza began, all the club's activities have been halted as violence has also soared across the occupied West Bank.

Lajee Celtic football club, informally known as Aida Celtic, was set up in 2016 in a joint effort between the Lajee Center in Aida and members of the Green Brigade, a left-wing fan group of Glasgow Celtic which has often expressed solidarity with Palestine.

For Mohammad Azzeh, the director of the Lajee cultural center, the football team has greater meaning than just sport – it has a role in resisting Israeli occupation. “More important than only a football team, the team gives a chance to build unity and relationships between Palestinians,” he told Al Jazeera. “Something that we are missing because of the occupation.”

Much of Celtic's fanbase has a strong Irish nationalist identity and many fans have long expressed solidarity with the Palestinian plight. In 2016 Celtic fans displayed hundreds of Palestinian flags when they played Israeli club Hapoel Be'er Sheva in a UEFA Champions League game in Glasgow – for which UEFA fined the Scottish club about 8,600 pounds (\$10,800).

In response, the Green Brigade launched a fundraising campaign called “Match the Fine for Palestine”. “The campaign was designed mainly to challenge UEFA's own racism towards Palestine and further our message of solidarity,” a Green Brigade member told Al Jazeera.

They dramatically exceeded expectations, eventually raising 176,076 pounds (\$221,486).

After paying the club's fine, they donated the rest of the money to the Medical Aid for Palestinians charity and the Lajee Center. The Lajee Center and the Green Brigade had organised various sporting and cultural activities since 2010, including inviting a team of young players from Aida to play in a football tournament in Belfast.

“The [2016] campaign and global exposure became so significant that we wanted to create a lasting legacy; something to cement and sustain the relationship between Celtic and Palestine for years to come,” says a member of the Green Brigades, involved with the creation of the team, who prefers not to be identified. “That legacy was Aida Celtic.”

The Lajee Celtic professional team is trying to register to compete as a professional team in the Palestinian Premier League next season, but the process has been held up first by bureaucracy and now by the war. Lajee Celtic also want to travel abroad to carry the Palestinian struggle message internationally through football.

As well as a senior side, Lajee Celtic's academy has a youth team and a programme involving about 80 boys from Aida, al-Azza, Dheisheh, Bethlehem and surrounding villages. “Part of the reason we changed the name from Aida to Lajee Celtic, is to make it open for everyone, anyone of Bethlehem that wants to be part of the team,” Azzeh said.

Azzeh, 33, has lived all his life in the camp and has been involved with Lajee Center since he was 10. He became director of the Lajee Center in 2021. Before that, he worked as a freelance journalist – covering one of the incursions of the Israeli army into the Aida camp he was shot in the face in 2013. He also recalls the time the red light from an Israeli sniper shone on his chest as he walked through the sculpture of a key at the entrance to the camp which symbolises the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

Before October 7, Lajee Celtic faced problems well known to all Aida camp residents; Israeli military raids on the camp and the indiscriminate firing of tear gas, rubber bullets and even live ammunition near the pitch often forced them to cancel training.

But violence by the Israeli military and settlers against Palestinians in the occupied West Bank has soared since the war on Gaza began, with at least 266 Palestinians killed in the territory and more than 3,600 arrested – including a Lajee Celtic coach, who is being held under “administrative detention” without charge or trial.

Professional football has halted across Palestine and Israel since October 7.

Azzeh says the decision he took to stop the activities of Lajee Celtic and the academy was hard but necessary; he feels he must protect the children and the staff from possible attacks by Israeli forces on the Aida camp. Settler attacks and Israeli military restrictions on Palestinians’ movement in the occupied West Bank also mean travelling is increasingly dangerous.

And playing football at a time like this feels wrong, he says.

“The moment you see kids in Gaza being killed, you don’t have the mood to continue doing the normal project and activities as nothing is happening,” he said. “[Although] we cannot compare what is happening in the West Bank with Gaza – we feel useless for our families and friends in Gaza.”

But he lamented the emotional toll the decision not to play was taking.

Mejd Hamed, a 14-year-old youth player with Lajee Celtic living in Beit Jala, told Al Jazeera he was devastated to be unable to play football, although he understood the decision. “Since October 7, nothing in my life is normal as it used to be: Schools are closed most of the time, I’m not able to go out with friends and for Lajee Celtic, since that time, we have not had any training,” he said.

Staff are also missing the project. Nahar Shamroukh, a 34-year-old living in Dheisheh refugee camp near Bethlehem, is a coach of youth players and children aged 5 to 17 years old, in addition to playing in the senior team. “Lajee Celtic is my second home, the team is my second family, caring about the youth as if they were my children or brothers,” he said.

But as the war against Gaza and the heightened violence and repression of Israeli forces in the occupied West Bank enters its third month the club may not be able to play again for the foreseeable future.

Celtic fans, meanwhile, have continued to show solidarity with Palestinians, defying their club’s board and UEFA to show Palestinian flags and banners at games. Hundreds of members of the Green Brigades have subsequently been banned from attending matches by the club.

The Green Brigade continues providing support to Lajee Celtic by fundraising through sales of Lajee Celtic shirts and donations. The fan group also keeps in contact with Lajee Celtic to support and advise on the direction and activities of the club.

Mejd thinks support from Celtic fans helps to dispel an image some Europeans have of Palestinians as “terrorists”, and brings a better understanding of Palestinian resistance.

“To have a team and people from Europe who support us, give us strength to do more and continue resisting with all of our ways to get our freedom”, says Mejd.

Despite all the current hardship, he continues to dream of a future as a footballer.

“Nothing here is normal, but we love life, and we resist the occupation to be able to live life,” he said. “I wish to be able to come back to the pitch, and to be able to meet my teammates there and play football together again. For the future, I know that we will be able to be a great team here in Palestine.”

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