

Palestine, Settler Colonialism, and Sport

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Palestine is a beautiful country, renowned for its welcoming inhabitants, picturesque sea shores, and abundant olive trees. The hospitable Palestinian people are always ready to share their rich culture and traditions with visitors and people who wish to learn about Palestine despite the [colonial war Israel has waged against Palestine for more than a hundred years](#).¹ The Palestinian people's enduring spirit is not only evident in their rich cultural heritage, but also in their longstanding and resilient sporting traditions.

Palestine's sporting history includes [dozens of athletic clubs from all regions of Palestine in existence](#) prior to the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948, during which [the state of Israel was founded on the forced displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians and mass ethnic cleansing](#). Palestinians also fought for decades for inclusion in mega sporting events such as the Olympic Games and as an [official member-nation of FIFA, struggles directly tied to their assertions of sovereignty and nationhood](#) as Israeli rule constructed an [apartheid state](#). More recently, scholars have considered sport and physical cultural activities such as [skateboarding](#) and [parkour](#) as examples of Palestinian youth, in particular, creating joy amidst the ongoing siege. Palestinian decolonial efforts through sport and physical culture are both a local and international movement, as Siri Schwabe demonstrates in her [illumination of Deportivo Palestino](#), a professional football club in Chile founded by Palestinian immigrants, and whose political engagement is tied to both its representational presence on the pitch and its connection to the larger Palestinian struggle. During Israeli occupation, in other words, sport for Palestinians is and has always been about more than simple recreation: it is directly tied to culture, nation, and peoplehood.

After years of occupation, beginning after the [Balfour declaration](#) in 1917 and intensifying with the Nakba in 1948, [Palestinian lands have progressively been eroded and Israeli territories expanded](#). Depending on where Palestinians live, their rights, laws, hierarchy, and levels of oppression vary greatly. Palestinian land has now been split into four distinct regions, each with its own complex situation: 1. The Heartland ([also referred to as the 48 borders](#) in reference to the borders created by the Nakba, now called Israel), frequently refers to the occupied territories where Palestinians hold Israeli citizenship but [do not have the same rights as Jewish/Israeli 'nationals', there in excess of 65 Israeli laws that discriminate against Palestinians](#). 2. The West Bank, under military rule, where Palestinians face stringent restrictions and limited autonomy. 3. The Gaza Strip, under siege, endures severe economic hardships and frequent conflicts. 4. East Jerusalem, where Palestinians have permanent residency but face discrimination and severe prejudice.

Palestine is a humanitarian and environmental social justice issue. The ecosystem that has been constructed by Israel and Zionist ideologies is one of ['greenwashing,' the idea that Israel suggests they are protecting 'their' lands but are in fact destroying the ecosystem](#), water usage, electricity, and access to natural resources, through [settler colonialism](#). Namely, settler colonialism is the process by which settlers claim already occupied Indigenous territories through institutions and practices designed to separate Indigenous peoples from their connections to their territories.

¹ The authors of this paper have a pro-Palestine position. Specifically, first author of the paper is a British Palestinian and has spent time in Palestine reflecting the opinion of the lands shared. Importantly, a pro-Palestine position is not opposed to Judaism or to Jewish people, but to the settler colonial project of Zionism. The conflation of these very different positions is part of the anti-Palestinian sentiment that predominates in the mainstream Western discourse around the ongoing violence.

[Sport, recreation, and settler colonialism are intimately interwoven](#), with sport and physical culture serving both as sites of [settler colonial violence](#) and as spaces of [Indigenous resistance, resurgence, and reterritorialization](#).

Settler colonial violence unfolds at different paces and with different specific contours in various geopolitical contexts. Ultimately, however, it is a genocidal project aimed at preventing Indigenous peoples from maintaining their unique identities and connections to their territory. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this genocidal project in 2024 is unfolding on lands claimed by Israel as Palestinian people are forcibly displaced from their homes and mercilessly attacked by the powerful Israeli army (funded and armed by Western imperial powers) as well as many Israeli citizens who have and continue to attack Palestinians and [disrupt aid to Palestinian people and communities](#). It is important to note that other Israelis [and many people in the Jewish diaspora](#) protest actively protest their government's actions.

Though Gaza is known as the world's largest [open-air prison](#), it is now best likened to a concentration camp. In prison, one gets food, water, shelter; the people of Gaza are without basic necessities. At the time of writing, official estimates suggest that more than 40,000 Palestinians, including over 16,000 children, over 11,000 women, and over 150 journalists, have been killed since the latest offensive was launched in October 2023. Hundreds of thousands more [on the brink of starvation](#) while their homes and refugee camps continue to be [bombed](#). Moreover, these are certain to be significant underestimates, as many remain buried under the rubble, and scores more have died due to the destruction of basic sanitary and medical infrastructure. A July 2024 [article](#) published in The Lancet puts the estimate closer to 200,000 Palestinians killed. Hospitals, universities, and homes have been reduced to rubble. So, too, have football stadiums and other sporting facilities that were only recently vital sites of public life and connections between Palestinian people, culture, and territories.

[Football stadia specifically were used by Israel as sites to detain captives, strip them of clothes and dignity, and hold Palestinians as prisoners in military barracks](#). Or, they were used as shelter for the thousands of displaced families. Notably, the media showed the [Yarmouk football stadium, among the oldest in Gaza, used for said military detainment of Palestinians and the pitch being bulldozed afterwards](#). It is reported that [all football pitches have been bombed in Gaza](#), eradicating the ability and necessity for play, a welcome distraction from living in a short stretch of land with no way out. In the midst of the barrages of attacks, the Palestinian people have maintained incredible levels of resistance and survival through sport, as many young people took part in a [football tournament](#) in Rafah on April 28, 2024, which the American Friends Service Committee organized.

[Both FIFA and the IOC have refused to denounce Israel](#) throughout the latest chapter of its bloody siege on Palestine, which contradicts their previous sanctions in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As recently as March 6, IOC President Thomas Bach reaffirmed his support of Israel's Olympic status ahead of the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, while in the same media availability [citing Russia's invasion and annexation of Ukraine](#) as continued justification for its expulsion from the Olympic/Paralympic community. In May, the Palestinian Football Federation submitted a request to FIFA to ban Israel from international competitions. FIFA has since extended its original deadline (July 20) to make its decision. Such examples of hypocrisy illuminate the ways in which humanity and dignity are withheld from Palestinian athletes, coaches, and people by international federations, even as many current

and former athletes are [collectively calling for an immediate ceasefire](#), while demonstrators at a [June 8 protest outside the Olympic Committee](#) headquarters called for an outright ban of Israel from the Olympics.

We have witnessed the unfolding of student encampments, and the violent carceral responses to many of them, on campuses across Turtle Island this past spring, as well as the use of international mega-events as platforms for condemning the extraordinary levels of violence against Palestinians. As such, it will be important to see which institutions and people continue to forefront the humanity and human rights of Palestinians and, conversely, which (continue to) draw on Islamophobia to dehumanize Palestinians and remain complicit in what may be the best-documented genocide in human history.

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