



CLUB DEPORTIVO PALESTINO, CHILE

Palestine solidarity on the football pitch

Ahmad Alzoubi

MIDDLE EAST MONITOR

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His research focuses on ties between the Palestinian diaspora in Latin America and the media's role in preserving their culture and identity. His articles speak of the relationship between the Palestinian cause and Latin American countries and Brazil. He also writes about other subjects of the Arab world.

Anyone who watches Club Deportivo Palestino playing, or sees one of its shirts in official photographs, may think that it is a Palestinian football club. In a way, that's exactly what it is, and yet it is based in Chile, thousands of miles from occupied Palestine. It is Chile's own version of Palestine solidarity — on a football pitch.

Chile has the largest Palestinian diaspora community in Latin America; the third or fourth largest in the world. There are 400,000 Palestinian Chileans now in their fourth or fifth generation; the sons and daughters of the pioneers who left the Middle East many years before the events that shredded their native land to pieces.



Fans of Chile's Club Deportivo Palestino in 2014 [Football Federation of Chile]

The club attracts support not only in Palestine, but also across Chile, especially in the capital Santiago and neighbouring towns, where it is held in great affection. Its supporters cheer every single achievement of their football team.

In 1955, Deportivo Palestino won its first national championship, under Argentinian coach Guillermo Cole. In 1978, the club won its second championship. Its players include Roberto Bishara and Alexis Nuramboena. Other Palestinian Chileans, such as Luis Antonio Jimenez, signed for foreign clubs.

In 2002, the Palestine national football team started to call up players from the diaspora. Until 2016, at least 14 players in the international squad were *chilestinos*, a Spanish term used to refer to Palestinian Chileans. In 2016, the Palestinian squad had nine of its starting 11 from Chile.



Club Deportivo Palestino during a match for the Copa Libertadores de América [Futbol Todo]

Deportivo Palestino competed in the most important football club tournament in Latin America, the Copa Libertadores de América in 2015. It has also played twice in the second most important, the Copa Sudamericana. In 2022, the club finished sixth in Chile's national league.

After qualifying for the Copa Libertadores, the club's then president Fernand Aguad told *Gazeta Esportiva* website about his pride in being recognised by the Arab community. For him, the club had lived a dream by playing in the most prestigious tournament on the continent. "We are part of Chilean professional football history. We hadn't played abroad for 36 years, so this fills us with happiness, especially because our matches were broadcast in the Middle East."

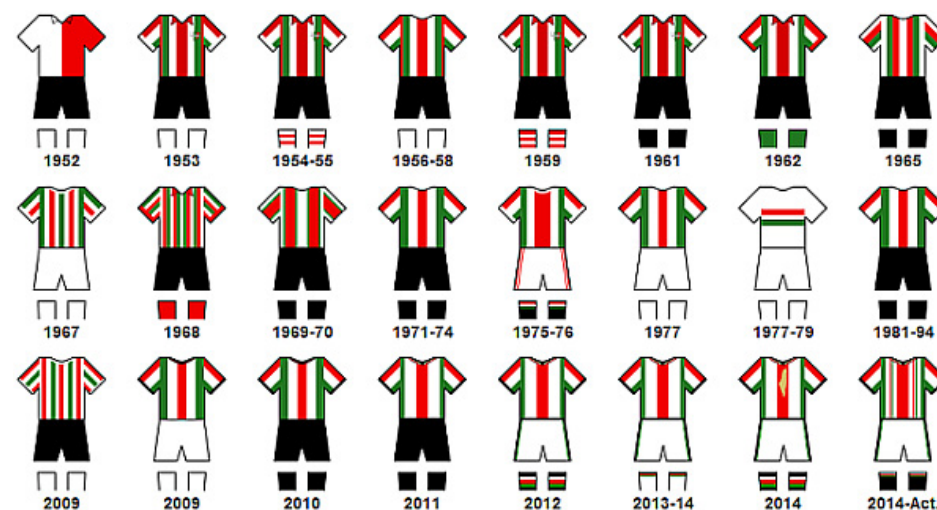


Players of Club Deportivo Palestino show solidarity with occupied Jerusalem on 8 May, 2021 [Francisco Longa/Club Deportivo Palestino]

Club Deportivo Palestino's name, colours and symbolism pay tribute to Palestinian identity. This is extended across the football world every time that its players compete in tournaments either with the club or with the national teams in Palestine or Chile.

LOVE AND RESISTANCE

Football is popular among the Palestinian people. Their love of sport and the prominence of their small country's struggle against the Israeli occupation has attracted sponsorship for Deportivo Palestino from the Bank of Palestine for more than 20 years. The club carries the institution's name and the hopes of an entire nation, and sometimes displays the map of Palestine on its shirts.



Club Deportivo Palestino's shirts since 1953 [Wikipedia]

Football is a link between people all over the world. It can reach communities and consciences worldwide.

Look what happened when some boys were playing football in Kafer Sur, Tulkarem, in the occupied West Bank. The ball was kicked over the barbed wire fence installed by Israel. According to the Ma'an Palestinian news agency, Israel had seized the area where the ball landed, intending to build the Separation Wall around the village, so only soldiers had access.

With a lost ball, and no help in sight, the boys were stuck. The episode highlighted a breach of international law. The children sent a letter to the then-secretary-general of the UN, Ban Ki-Moon, to ask for his assistance so that the Israeli authorities would return the ball or let the boys enter the “forbidden zone” to get it. Israel denied permission, and refused to return the ball, thus violating the children’s rights.

The boys also advocated for their right to play in their ancestral land, a freedom eradicated by the Israeli wall under construction since 2002. A few days later, the website *Bendito Futbol* expressed its regret that Ban Ki-Moon had not answered the children’s request.



Palestinian boys play football on a beach. In July 2014, an Israeli missile killed a group of Palestinian boys playing at the same spot [Joe Catron/Electronic Intifada]

The Chilean players and their accomplishments thrill the people of occupied Palestine. In late 2015, a year after the third most recent major Israeli military offensive against the Gaza Strip and with violence escalating in occupied Jerusalem, Deportivo Palestino qualified for the Copa Libertadores de América. It was like a New Year gift to the Palestinian people.

The President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas, sent his appreciation to the club. “You give us joy at this tragic year-end as we mourn the victims of Gaza and Jerusalem,” wrote Abbas. “Such messages show us that, despite every challenge, there is always a light at the end of the tunnel. You proved once again that, wherever we are, we are one true people – in Jerusalem, Beit Jala or Santiago de Chile.”



A message of gratitude to Club Deportivo Palestino: “Thank you, Tino Tino, for the joy you gave to the Palestinian people” [Club Deportivo Palestino]

The unprecedented achievement was also a Christmas gift to football supporters in Chile. Most members of the Palestinian community in Chile are Christians, making up 90 per cent of the diaspora in the country. There are now more Palestinian Christians in Chile than there are in Palestine. The early community founded one of the first Syrian Palestinian churches in Santiago, the Orthodox Cathedral of Saint George, in 1917.

THE FOUNDERS



The first Club Deportivo Palestino team (1920): Elías Zaror, Miguel Saffi, and Nicolás Hirmas; Rafael Hirmas, Elías Hirmas, and Antonio Sarah; José Yunis, Víctor Panayotti, Emilio Deik, Jorge Lama, and Elías Deik

Deportivo Palestino has more or less existed since the early Palestinian migrations to Chile, so the club's early years had more connections with migrant Palestinian Arab identity than with the refugees following the establishment of Israel in their land in 1948. The football team arose out of a developing sense of community and social get-togethers around sporting events. So it was that around fifty people gathered on Saturday, 25 March, 1916, and founded Club Deportivo Palestino.

On 8 August, 1920, seventeen migrants inscribed their names in history as the “founding fathers of the club prevailing until today,” explain Nicolás Abusada, Carlos Eltit, Cristián Gidi and Alfredo Sara – four self-confessed fans – in their book *More Than a Team, an Entire People*.



More Than a Team, an Entire People, by fans and researchers Nicolás Abusada, Carlos Eltit, Cristián Gidi and Alfredo Sara

The 377-page book in Spanish contains interviews, assessments and treasured interviews with Eugenio Chahuán and his team at the Centre of Arab Studies of the University of Chile. It covers the team's history, the most emotional matches, key events and groundbreaking players.

The timeline connects key football moments and achievements to the period of the Palestinian migrants' settlement and integration in Chile. This historical stage also explains the ties between the diaspora community and their homeland before it was occupied in 1948. The Nakba (“catastrophe”) led to a further wave of Palestinian immigrants in Chile.

Before the 1947 UN Partition Plan for Palestine gave international legitimacy to the theft of Palestine, by the creation of Israel, the Chilean club earned the nickname the “millionaire’s squad” for its success and funding from wealthy Arab citizens. To the emerging Arab elite in Chile, investing in sport was a way of paying tribute to their roots in the Middle East.

The Santiago-based club is now surrounded by homes and shops which didn’t exist when it was founded. At the time, the only structure was the small Santo Domingo Club, a meeting place for several Arab organisations and associations. It is accurate to say, therefore, that Club Deportivo Palestino was born from a football club serving the community since the late 19th century.

Palestinians owned the plot of land and the street next door. Manager Maurice Khamis remembers their names: Jarour from Bethlehem and Abu Mehr from Beit Jala. They sold their land to the entrepreneur Carlos Abu Mehr Toma who rebuilt the facilities to house the club.



Club Deportivo Palestino women’s futsal team during the Libertadores de América 2018 in Uruguay

Deportivo Palestino’s primary goal is to preserve and spread Arab Palestinian cultural values in the diaspora; the traditions of the ancestral communities. Many politicians and personalities regard Deportivo Palestino as more than a sporting brand due to its unwavering stance in solidarity with the people of occupied Palestine.

Tributes to the Palestinian struggle are paid on the club’s official website: “This brief introduction is to honour those who are not here today; those who fought and served the Palestinian cause for years, with an immense effort to build a second home in Chile, preserving our ancestors’ traditions. To all who served our community, we thank you endlessly for your work, determination and enthusiasm.”

The first Palestinian migrants landed in Chile in the mid-19th century. The Ottoman Empire was near the end, and many people tried to escape mandatory conscription during the First World War, or the British Mandate in Palestine.

From 1850 to 1900, most Palestinian migrants in Chile came from the villages and towns of Bethlehem, Beit Jala, Beit Sahour, as well as other areas. The Palestinian refugees entered the country through Brazil or Argentina, separated from their neighbours, relatives or friends who headed to France and Italy through Lebanon or Egypt. Everyone was looking for a job, a livelihood and a new opportunity for a decent life.

Britain’s 1917 Balfour Declaration practically gifted foreign Jews with the land of Palestine. It gave rise to a new colonial occupation protected and boosted by Europe. The 1948 Nakba and ethnic cleansing, followed in 1967 by the Six Day War, led to millions of Palestinians becoming homeless and stateless. They were denied their legitimate right to return to the ancestral land now occupied by Jewish settlers.



Nakba (“catastrophe”): The expulsion of the Palestinian people with the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 [Archives]

Several other events led to Palestinian migration. For instance, the beginning of the Civil War in Lebanon in 1975 and the Israeli invasion seven years later. Other waves of refugees stemmed from the First and Second Intifadas, and the expulsion of Palestinians from Kuwait and Iraq during the First and Second Gulf Wars.

Palestinians reaching Chile were encouraged by those who had gone before; in turn, they encouraged others after them. It was from such a history of migration that Club Deportivo Palestino was founded and continues to thrive to this day.

Club Deportivo Palestino online presentation shows an aerial view of La Cisterna Stadium in Santiago de Chile

The Bank of Palestine is the largest sponsor of Club Deportivo Palestino. Since its foundation, the club has benefited from an integrated community in Chile. The first Arab migrants contributed effectively to the late-19th century Chilean economy, looking for new human resources, especially from Europe, as happened in neighbouring countries like Brazil. The Palestinians took their distinctive culture, technical knowledge and skills in commerce and the textile industry to their new country.

Brilliant Arab names have also emerged in Latin American literature, including the Chilean-born Palestinian refugee Mahfud Massis. His works carry several mentions of his Arab roots, including original terms for the pyramids, the ancient pharaohs and mythical deserts. His books include *Los Sueños de Cain*, *El Libro de Los Astros Apagados*, and *Llanto del Exiliado*. The latter deals with exile and advocates for the Palestinians' legitimate right to lead a dignified life in their ancestral home.



Bank of Palestine logo on Club Deportivo Palestino's official home shirt

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Palestinian families – such as the Hermas, Obe Salima, Karmi, Hazboun, Muslim, Awad and Nazzal – have controlled around 75 per cent of the Chilean textile industry since the mid-1930s. Their ventures conquered the local market and they exported their goods to the United States and beyond. On 25 September, 1940, the local newspaper *La Union* acknowledged the growth of the textile industry as a direct result of Arab immigration.

For over a century, the Palestinian community has been active in politics, sport and economics. The diaspora has preserved Palestinian collective memory transmitted through the generations. Although the Arabic language has not prevailed amidst integration with the host society, public and private sectors in Chile ensure that it is still accessible. There are three Arabic schools in the country — in Concepción, Vina del Mar and Santiago — with Palestinian principals and history classes.

There is also a mosque and four churches founded by the Arab community. The active participation of the community in building Chilean national identity has seen numerous political leadership figures to rise to prominence in Chile over the years.

Among the most prominent chilestinos are Francisco Shahwan, former senator and vice-president; and Daniel Jadur, advocating for Palestine since his 11th birthday, who was elected mayor of Recoleta in 2012 and was an early presidential candidate in 2021, standing for the Communist Party of Chile. The party didn't rubber stamp his candidacy because of fierce opposition from Zionists. Moreover, several Palestinian migrants have made their fortune in Chile, including Alvaro Sayegh, a member of the International Institute of Finance, listed as the 729th wealthiest person in the world by Forbes magazine; he's the fourth wealthiest man in the national ranking.

In the 1950s, a trend to the political left was growing within the Palestinian community in Chile. At this juncture, the then-President Carlos Ibanez appointed two Labour Party Chilean politicians as ministers of state. Raphael Taroud Al-Sidawi (1918-2009) was Minister of the Economy and Energy, a senator and a presidential candidate in 1970. The writer Edesio Alvarado dedicated the book *El Turco Tarud* to him.

Nowadays, at least ten per cent of Chilean senators, eleven per cent of the members of parliament, nine mayors, and 26 municipal councillors are from Palestinian families. Francisco Shahwan was vice president from 2006 to 2010, and was then elected as a senator. Mahmud Aleuy was Deputy Minister of the Interior, the first Muslim Palestinian citizen to hold a senior government post.



Club Deportivo Palestino fans in Santiago de Chile [Handout]

The Palestinian community in Chile have founded a number of institutions aiming to preserve their culture and identity while integrating into local society. Among them are the Palestinian Federation, the Committee for the Right of Return, the Palestinian Democratic Committee, the Union of Palestinian Women, the General Union of Palestinian Students, the Arab School and Bethlehem Foundation, the Palestinian Union-Club of Valparaiso e Viña del Mar, the Youth Association to Palestine (AJPP), and the Home for Syrian-Palestinian Children.



Club Deportivo Palestino fans in 2016 [Palestina Libre]

ACTIVE SOLIDARITY

There is no doubt that the Chilean Club Deportivo Palestino is Palestinian at heart. Its shirt has the colours of the Palestinian flag. The football club also declares its connection to the Palestinian plight and resistance publicly. However, Deportivo Palestino pays the price for such solidarity. In 2014, the Football Federation of Chile fined the club \$1,300 for dis-

playing the 1948 Palestine map – the land of Palestine before the establishment of Israel – instead of the number 1 on its shirt. The club had just reached the Chilean first division but suffered harsh reprisals from the Zionist Jewish community.



Club Deportivo Palestino shirt showing a map of 1948 Palestine in place of the number 'one', 2014

In response to the map on Deportivo Palestino's shirts, the Chilean team Ñublense filed a complaint with the National Association of Professional Football (ANFP). The Ñublense president, Patrick Kiblsky, was a member of Chile's Jewish community. He insisted that, "Football is not politics."

Politics or not, with the Palestinian map on its shirt Deportivo Palestino won three matches. The Zionist Jewish community kept up its protests, accusing the Palestinians in the diaspora of "politicising the sport" and "bringing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to Chile".

According to Gabriel Zeljasnik, a former president of the Jewish community in Chile, the club fostered a "hateful fanaticism". He added that, "This is an abhorrent way of political violence in Chilean football."

Even after being fined, Deportivo Palestino players and backroom staff reaffirmed their protest by reprinting the Palestinian map for the next match, this time on their shirtsleeves. "We couldn't use the map in place of the number," explained the club's president, circumventing the arbitrary restrictions on the use of their rightful icons.

The episode is important because players' photographs with the Palestinian map went viral on social media, and the club made a substantial number of extra shirt sales. The promotional merchandise became a symbol of solidarity and resistance, and was seen on civil demonstrations and protests around the world.

At its La Cisterna Stadium, the Palestinian flag is always raised. Sadly, the law now prohibits fans from taking traditional drums to matches.



Wall of La Cisterna Stadium [Carlos Yo/Wikimedia]

Deportivo Palestino players visited Palestine in 2016 and established a local training centre. Laying the cornerstone, the delegation declared: “We are in Gaza! Deportivo Palestino opens the first football school in the Gaza Strip in the second half of 2022.”

Deportivo Palestino has also shown solidarity with other exiles from war and colonisation. The head of the Chamber of Commerce of Patronato district, a Palestinian citizen, called for a protest against the 2006 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Lebanese and Palestinian flags were seen on the streets.

As a solidarity gesture with the people from Jerusalem and against the Israeli violations at Al-Aqsa Mosque, on 8 May, 2021, the club’s players entered the stadium for a match against Colo-Colo FC wearing a *keffiyeh*, the traditional Palestinian scarf. The civil demonstration was intended to raise awareness about events in Sheikh Jarrah, a Jerusalem neighbourhood whose residents faced expulsion to make room for illegal Israeli settlers.



Deportivo Palestino team asks for justice for Shireen Abu Akleh, the *Al Jazeera* reporter murdered by an Israeli sniper in the West Bank [Deportivo Palestino]

As Palestinian resistance in Gaza railed against provocative Israeli incursions at Al-Aqsa Mosque in occupied Jerusalem, and protesters took to the streets of the West Bank and in the occupation state itself, Israel conducted a brutal bombing campaign against the civil population of besieged Gaza. Club Deportivo Palestino expressed renewed solidarity. In May 2022, the players condemned the murder of Shireen Abu Akleh, an *Al Jazeera* journalist shot in the head by an Israeli sniper in the occupied West Bank.

The club’s solidarity was no surprise. Deportivo Palestino and its fans have always expressed support for the Palestinian people and their legitimate right to resist the occupation. The Chilean team is one of the few professional football clubs to use its shirts to show its commitment to the founders’ ancestral land occupied by Zionists for decades.



Deportivo Palestino celebrates being 102 years-old “representing the colours of Palestine” [Palestinian Community of Chile]

CENTENNIAL AMONG COVID19

Deportivo Palestino celebrated its 100th anniversary on 20 August, 2020. The Covid-19 pandemic was reaching its peak, and the club had to limit its celebrations to social media. The board of directors, however, prepared a retrospective exhibition of images and video footage, recalling the seasons, key players and achievements, promoting the Palestinian community, history and legitimate cause.

“Acknowledging the conditions affecting the population during the pandemic, our club prepared a handful of activities to interact with fans and followers, including a virtual party bringing together different countries and territories, to reaffirm the Palestinian history worldwide,” explained the club.

In its centennial year, Deportivo Palestino sold a special version of its shirt and promoted a series of shows transmitted live on the club’s social media platforms. The team also opened its first online museum.

Despite the challenges, managers, players and fans celebrated the occasion, including former players, like Elías Figueroa, viewed by many as one of the most skilled defenders in football history. He played for the Chile national team in the 1966, 1974 and 1982 World Cups, and was voted the best player in the 1977 and 1978 seasons.

In 1977, after playing for Sports Club Internacional, a Brazilian team in Porto Alegre, Figueroa returned to Chile to play for Deportivo Palestino. He was crucial to the team’s success in that year’s national league, and qualification for the 1978 Libertadores da América for the first time.

Rodolfo Dubó was also prominent in 1970s Chilean football. He holds the record for the number of matches played for Deportivo Palestino: 463 games, including 329 first division matches, at least 104 national

championship matches, and eleven continental games. With Dubó, Deportivo Palestino won the 1975 and 1977 Chilean championship cups and the 1978 national league. The team is unforgettable; it included Elías Figueroa, Edgardo Fuentes, Manuel Rojas, Sérgio Messen and Oscar Fabbiani. With them, Deportivo Palestino took part in three Libertadores in 1976, 1978 and 1979, when it reached the semi-final.



1978 Deportivo Palestino team: Manuel Araya, Rodolfo Dubó, Oscar Fabbiani, Elías Figueroa, Edgardo Fuentes, and Eddie Campodonico; below: Ricardo Lazbal, Manuel Rojas, Mario Varas, Sergio Messen, and Pedro Pinto [Deportivo Palestino]

Dubó debuted in the Chile national team on 26 January, 1977, playing 46 matches, and scoring three goals for his country. His participation in the squad included the qualifying matches for the 1978 World Cup in Argentina, the 1979 Copa América, the 1982 World Cup in Spain, and the 1983 Copa América.

The history of Chile's Club Deportivo Palestino has not ended. It is lived by every top player who pulls the shirt on and plays in La Cisterna Stadium in a call for freedom for the Palestinian people in their ancestral land; a Palestine free from the river to the sea.



Fans of Chile's Club Deportivo Palestino show Palestinian flags and colors during a match against Universidad de Concepción in the La Cisterna Stadium, in Santiago de Chile, 2018 [Carlos Figueroa]



Deportivo Palestino T-shirt reads in Arabic and Spanish:
"More than a team, an entire people."

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